10¢

TEXAS RANGERS

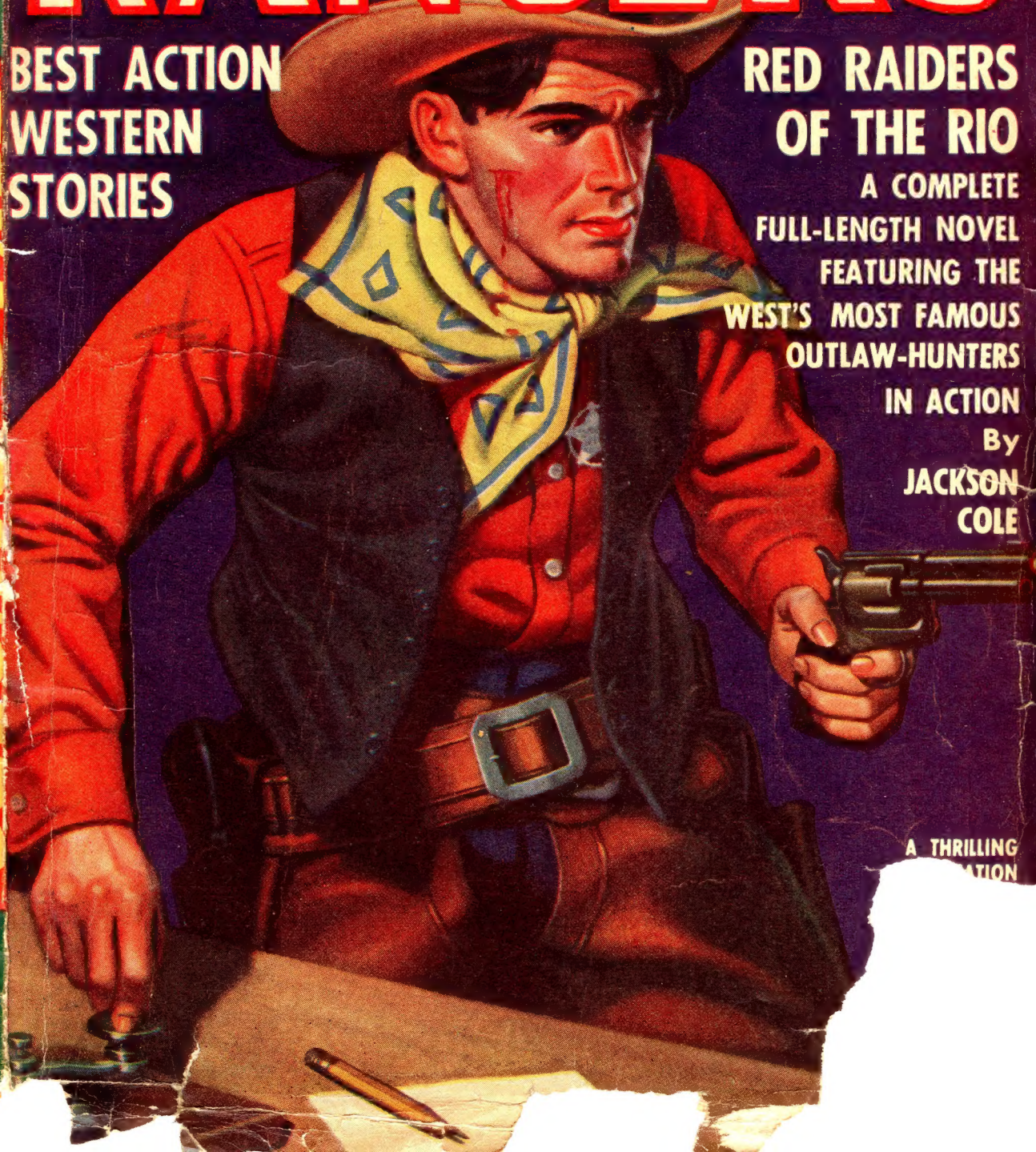
APR.

BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES

RED RAIDERS OF THE RIO

A COMPLETE FULL-LENGTH NOVEL FEATURING THE WEST'S MOST FAMOUS OUTLAW-HUNTERS IN ACTION

By JACKSON COLE



A THRILLING [illegible]ATION

10¢ BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES TEXAS RANGERS APR. 19[illegible]

C'mon— BOYS·GIRLS MEN·WOMEN PICK YOUR PRIZE

THESE PRIZES ARE GIVEN TO YOU—Just send for 24 packets of easy selling Garden Spot Seeds which you can easily and quickly sell to your friends and neighbors at 10c each. Return the $2.40 collected and select your Prize in accordance to our offers. SEND NO MONEY—WE TRUST YOU.

JUNIOR GUITAR GIVEN

Get this handsome instrument **NOW.** Here's How. Just send your name and address (**SEND NO MONEY**). **WE TRUST YOU** with 24 pkts. of Garden Seeds to sell at 10 cts. a pkt. When sold send $2.40 collected and **WE WILL SEND** this mahogany finished guitar and Five Minute Instruction Book absolutely **FREE.** Send for seeds **NOW.**

PRIZE TYPEWRITER GIVEN

$10 for neat and neatest letter written on this machine by July 1 1940. **Simply dispose of only one order of Garden Spot Seeds at 10c a pkt. and Typewriter is yours.**

22 Piece TABLEWARE SET

6 Knives, 6 Forks, 6 Teaspoons, Butter Knife, Sugar Shell **GIVEN for selling only one order.**

Ladies' New Fashion WRIST WATCH GIVEN

More Than a Guaranteed Timekeeper

Sparkling enameled ivory case. Guaranteed Movement. **Yours for disposing of only two orders of Garden Spot Seeds.** MAIL COUPON TODAY.

GIANT SPY-GLASS

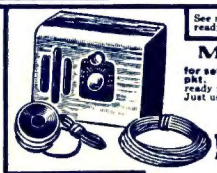
3 FOOT TELESCOPE

See moon, stars and people miles away. Gives new pleasure. Always ready. **Given for selling only one order.** Send for seeds today

Good Luck FISHING OUTFIT 28 PIECES

Steel rod, reel, casting line, 12 anelled hooks, 12 lead sinker, cork float and stringer. **Sell only one order.**

Will Make You Proud of Your Bedroom

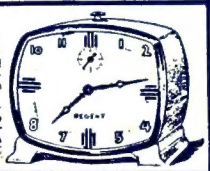


Midget Pocket RADIO GIVEN

for selling only two 24 packet orders of Garden Spot Seeds at 10c a pkt. Radio needs no batteries or electrical connections. Is complete and ready for use anywhere. **SEND NO MONEY. WE TRUST YOU. Hurry!** Just use this Coupon. Do not wait; do it NOW

Write for Seeds to:
Lancaster County Seed Co., Sta. 320 Paradise, Pa.

Household CLOCK



Can be used anywhere. Richly finished in two tone effect 30 hour movement. **Dispose of only 1 order and Clock is yours.** WRITE TODAY

Crinkled BED SPREAD

The crinkled stripes are neatly woven in contrasting shades Size 80x90 inches A beauty **Simply dispose of 1 order.**

BASKETBALL GIVEN

Latest Rubber Valve Type **Send No Money.** Just name and address **Given for disposing of only 24 pkts. of Garden Spot Seeds at 10c a pkt.** WRITE FOR SEEDS TODAY Hurry! Be First.

Real Live CANARY

Safe Delivery Guaranteed

What a pet! You will love it **Canary and Cage both given for selling only two orders.** WRITE TODAY

Sent Express Collect

SEND NO MONEY Just MAIL COUPON

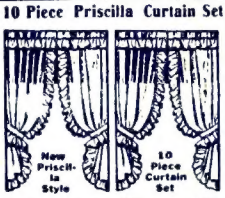
Blue Bird Granite Cooking Set

GIVEN

Will Make You Proud of Your Kitchen

Convenient and sanitary kitchen utensils. Entire Set, given as one Premium, consists of four regular-sized pieces: 1 Mixing Bowl, 1 Pudding Pan, 1 Preserving Kettle, with handle, 1 Sauce Pan **Given for selling only 24 pkts. of Garden Spot Seeds at 10c a pkt.** Write for seeds TODAY **Send No Money. We Trust You. Hurry! Be First.**

10 Piece Priscilla Curtain Set



New Priscilla Style

10 Piece Curtain Set

Curtain Set in refined white pattern, finished with 2 1-4 inch ruffles in colors. Each curtain is 20x90 inches. 2 pairs, 4 Curtains, 4 Tie Backs & 2 Ruffled Valances. 10 pieces in all. **All GIVEN to you as one premium for distributing only one order.** Postpaid

VIOLIN, BOW & INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN

IMPORTED

Handsome finish, highly polished Set of strings and bow included Send no money **Given for selling only one order.** MAIL THE COUPON TODAY BE FIRST

32 Piece Rose Petal DINNER SET GIVEN

This sparkling, beautiful set consists of 6 large plates, 6 small plates, 6 cups, 6 saucers, 6 cereal dishes, a large meat platter & a vegetable dish

2 orders. Sent express collect.

Home BARBER Outfit

Here is a money-saver, you can trim childrens' or adults' hair yourself without sending them to the barber. Consists of one pair of guaranteed Hair Clippers same as barber uses for the latest style cuts, one pair Diamond Point Barber Shears & 7 inch Barber Comb **GIVEN for selling 1 order.**

GIVEN

SEND NO MONEY — WE TRUST YOU.

MAIL COUPON TODAY for

5 FREE PROMPTNESS PRIZES!

SENT RIGHT ALONG WITH YOUR REGULAR PREMIUM IF WE GET THIS COUPON IN THE NEXT 5 DAYS. SO HURRY! FILL OUT TODAY AND MAIL.

TRANSFER PICTURES
AGE DESIGN RING
SIMULATION WRIST WATCH
A DELIGHTFUL GIFT FOR YOU
G-MEN BADGE
G MEN
YOU ARE NOW A MEMBER OF THE G MEN CLUB
60 PICTURES ACCURATELY AND BEAUTIFULLY COLORED
THIS MULTI-TONED WHISTLE

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Our 33rd Year

Lancaster County Seed Co.,
Station 320, Paradise, Pa.

Please send me 24 packets (one order) of Garden Spot Seeds to sell at 10 cts. a pkt for a fine Gift. I will sell and pay for seeds in 30 days. **Also send right along with my Regular Premium the 5 FREE PROMPTNESS PRIZES SHOWN ABOVE**

Name .....

Post Office .....

State. .....

Street or R. F. D. ..... Box .....

Print your last name plainly below

Save 2 cents by filling-in, pasting and mailing this Coupon on a 1c Post Card TODAY

To the man who wants to enjoy an ACCOUNTANT'S CAREER

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $2,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

Write For This Free Book

For your own good, don't put off investigation of ***all*** the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

Over 1850 Certified Public Accountants among LaSalle alumni

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

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I want to be an accountant. Send me, without cost or obligation, the 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays," and full information about your accountancy training program.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____ *City*_____

*Position*_____ *Age*_____

· EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW ·

TEXAS RANGERS

Vol. 10, No. 2 April, 1940 Price 10c

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD, RANGER

IN

A Full Book-Length Novel

RED RAIDERS of the RIO

By JACKSON COLE

When Destruction and Death Rule the Range, Jim Hatfield, Ace Texas Ranger, Goes on the Prod for a Fiendish Imposter! Follow the Lone Wolf of the Law as He Buckles on His Sure Six-guns and Rides into the Jaws of Death to Confront His Double - - - - - - - - - - - 12

Other Quick-Trigger Stories

BY HIS OWN ROPE - - - - - - - - - - - - - Sam Brant 86
A Lynch Noose Brings About a Rustler Showdown

A QUIET ELECTION - - - - - - - - - - - - Rex Sherrick 92
To Get a Peaceful Vote, Bentley Had to Blast a Crook to Hell

LONG SAM COLLECTS - - - - - - - - - - - - Lee Bond 96
What's a Wound to Littlejohn—when His Help is Needed?

AND

FAMOUS TEXAS RANGERS - - - - - - - A Story in Pictures 90
Lieutenant Ray Beavert's Campaign Against Renegade Indians

THE FRONTIER POST - - - - - - - - - - - - Captain Starr 102
Where Readers and Editor Meet. Join Our World-wide Club

TEXAS RANGERS, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 22 W. 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly $.60; single copies $.10. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter August 24, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1940, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any real person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING

TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 years.

Radio is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, offer good opportunities. My training includes Television, which promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make more money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. OD09,
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. OD09,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Send me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Fascinating, Profitable Profession

NOW OPEN to More Men & Women

If you are looking for a **NEW** and **BETTER** way to make a living, take up Swedish Massage, for now you can learn at home. This interesting big pay profession was for years available only to a few. Its secrets were guarded jealously and fabulous prices were paid for instruction. This same instruction is now available to you at a mere fraction of the former price and you need not leave your present work until you have qualified as an expert and can command an expert's pay. The demand for **BOTH MEN AND WOMEN** has shown a steady increase and few, if any, have ever lacked employment.

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Use spare time at home to master a profession which has made thousands of dollars for ambitious men and women. Many graduates have completed their training in three months but you can take your own time, it need not interfere with either work or pleasure. All instruction has been prepared by the teachers in our famous resident school—the same material is used and a **DIPLOMA** is awarded upon graduation.

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You may send me **FREE** and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, booklet, containing photographs and letters from graduates and complete details of your offer.

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Address .....

City ..... State .....

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WRITE FOR *FREE TRIAL OFFER!*

If you suffer from Asthma Paroxysms, from coughs, gasping, wheezing — write quick for daring FREE TRIAL OFFER of real relief. Inquiries from so-called "hopeless" cases especially invited. Write **NACOR, 426-A, State Life Building, Indianapolis, Ind.**

BE A PASSENGER TRAFFIC INSPECTOR
RAILWAY OR BUS—WE HAVE JOBS

Men—19 to 50—who complete easy, home-study course are placed at up to $135 per mo., plus expenses to start, or we refund tuition. Qualify in your spare time. Get Free Booklet describing our 21 yrs. service. **STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE, Div. 8504, Buffalo, N. Y.**

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ANYONE CAN OPERATE

Now, an electric welding, brazing and soldering Torch, complete with power unit, goggles and supplies, **Works INSTANTLY off any light socket.** Does a thousand and one repair jobs at amazingly LOW COST on aluminum, iron, steel and other metals. **Indispensable** for Auto, Body and Fender Repairs, and home repairs—shop, factory, farm, engineer, janitor, sheet metal, radio and bicycle repairs. Anyone can handle without previous experience with our simple instructions. **10-DAY HOME TRIAL** Write at once for Special Introductory Low Price Offer. Try 3 in 1 Electric Torch for 10 days at our risk, or get one free by helping to introduce it. **ELECTRO-TORCH CO., 2613-HF, Michigan Ave., Chicago**

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SKY FIGHTERS

and

THE LONE EAGLE

•

EACH **10c** AT ALL STANDS

America's New Favorite!

NOW ON SALE 10c AT ALL STANDS

FINED FOR IGNORANCE!

Don't Let It Happen to You!

The average grade school graduate earns $16.30* a week less than high school graduates earn.

The average high school graduate earns $25.25* a week less than do men with college or vocational training.

*Figures computed from Government report. For basis of computation, write American School.

College Grade Training Pays

Up to

$40 a week* EXTRA income

Study at HOME!

You Too Can Win a Better Job!

HAVE YOU thought about *home study?* You look around you at your friends, neighbors and fellow employes: This one earns $10 a week more than you—that one earns nearly double—a third, though appreciably younger than you, seems to be making better progress. Why? How can you catch up with them? You know that literally *thousands* of ambitious men and women have won substantial Success through using their spare time at home to master the principles and practice of their chosen lines. How can HOME STUDY help *you* make good?

The "Magic" of Home Study

There's no magic to home study. It's hard work—but it is *worth* the effort because it helps you overcome the handicap of having left school too soon. It frees you from the penalties of Ignorance—enables you to compete to better advantage in this NEW world of *college trained* men and women.

In 1900, only ONE person in 800 was a *high school* graduate. Today, one in every 837 is *college* trained. *That's* why you need so much more "on the ball" today than ever before. That's why American School has *stepped up* all its complete courses to include so much work of *college level.* You NEED it, to win out today!

These Advantages Speed Your Progress

More than 150 noted educators, engineers and executives helped prepare American School courses. An *Advisory Board* of 20 outstanding authorities—each an active leader in his field—is consulted when our work is prepared or changed. A Staff of competent instructors—home study *specialists*—works closely with the individual student.

Courses are not prepared from the "academic" viewpoint—but from the *practical.* Although dozens of leading universities and colleges use the same texts, the primary aim of *home study* is to help graduates win BETTER jobs at BIGGER pay as QUICKLY as possible. Every course is geared to this end. Jobs and job requirements are analyzed, circumstances of the average student are weighed, then every course is *speed-lined* to put the *Man* in the *Job* he wants at the *EARLIEST* opportunity.

Write American School about *your* promotion problems TODAY!

American School
Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois

Promotion Begins at HOME

Pay raises depend largely on what you do in SPARE time. Make it pay you dividends!

American School, Dept. G-458, Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago, Ill.

Gentlemen: I'll sit down and consider my Promotion Problems carefully if you will send me FREE information covering special training in subjects checked below. No obligation on my part.

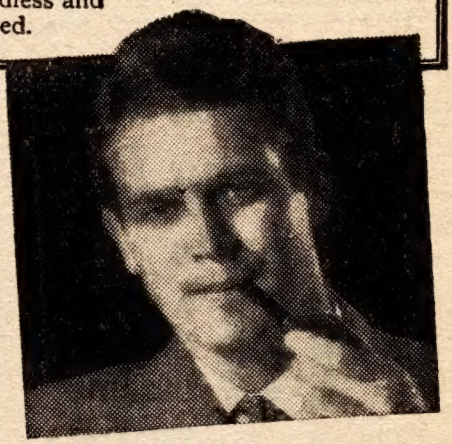
- ☐ High School Course
- ☐ Accounting and Auditing
- ☐ Architecture and Building
- ☐ Automotive Engineering
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Elec. and Gas Refrigeration
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Diesel Engineering
- ☐ Drafting and Design
- ☐ Liberal Arts
- ☐ Private Secretary
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Radio and Television
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Business Law
- ☐ Retail Merchandising

Name.....

Address.....

DON'T let Rupture make you Look Old!

Not the rupture itself, but the *worry and fear* it can cause makes many a man and woman look old beyond their years. But this is one kind of worry that is *absolutely needless.* Right here and now we offer to *prove* that it's needless and it costs you nothing if you are not 100% convinced.



If you have reducible rupture, wear a truss, and still have to worry, there is just one reason—an old-fashioned truss that doesn't half do its job. A hard, gouging pad is making you miserable. You constantly fear your rupture will slip down. You feel your condition is growing worse and can never get better. You can't be normally active and, in short, you worry all day and dream your worries at night. Stop it!

YOU WONT WORRY WITH A BROOKS PATENTED AIR-CUSHION RUPTURE APPLIANCE!

If you knew the grand and glorious security and comfort of the Brooks Patented Air-Cushion truss, you'd be *wearing* it right now, instead of just reading about it. You would be feeling free as air to do whatever you liked in every normal activity, hardly aware you had a Brooks on, and with not a rupture worry in your mind. You see, with a Brooks your rupture is held securely in place by a patented, air-cushioned pad of soft, yielding rubber instead of a hard, gouging pad. That patented Air-Cushion is designed to flatten and cling in any position. It is so comfortable you can wear it night and day. That and the fact that the Air-Cushion *holds like a hand* gives Nature the greatest possible chance to *close* the rupture opening and free you from wearing any truss, the Brooks included.

THE FAMOUS BROOKS PATENTED AIR-CUSHION

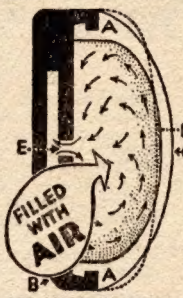
A—Pad which comes in contact with the body.

B—Light weight disc which holds pad.

C—Shows the shape of soft rubber pad before it is pressed against body.

D—Dotted line shows how the pad flattens out under pressure, expelling air.

E—Orifice through which the pad figuratively breathes as it adjusts to conform to different body pressures.



BROOKS CUSHIONS ARE MADE IN OVER 75 SHAPES AND SIZES

YOU'D WEAR A BROOKS APPLIANCE *ON TRIAL* WOULDN'T YOU?

If complete deliverance from all your rupture worries sounds "too good to be true," *don't let that stop you!* BROOKS asks no man or woman, or parent of a ruptured child, to buy a BROOKS Appliance outright and "take a chance". No, we will send you a complete BROOKS appliance for a thorough *trial.* Wear it. Compare it. Put it to every test you can think of. Get your doctor's opinion. Then if you are not satisfied, if you don't bless the day you heard of BROOKS, the trial costs you nothing. Anyone can afford a BROOKS. It costs no more than many old-fashioned store trusses. Yet it is made up for you *individually,* after your order is received. It is never sold in stores or through mail order houses—only by BROOKS. Remember this and steer clear of imitations.

OVER 9000 DOCTORS HAVE ORDERED THE BROOKS FOR THEMSELVES OR THEIR PATIENTS

The principle of the Patented Air-Cushion appeals to the physician's scientific knowledge of rupture. That's why we say "get your doctor's opinion." There are no stiff, punishing springs to set your nerves on edge and make you want to scream—no metal girdle to rust and corrode. A velvety soft body band holds the Air-Cushion in place with glove-like comfort. And you prove every advantage on trial, with an absolute guarantee of satisfaction or no cost.

Send for FREE Rupture Book and Amazing PROOF of RESULTS

The more you know about BROOKS, the more eager you will be to try it for yourself. You wouldn't be human not to want such glorious freedom from worry, such comfort and the peace of mind, the fresh, rested feeling that we say will make you younger looking, happier and more efficient. Send for FREE Book this very day!

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

Brooks Appliance Co.,
480-L State St., Marshall, Mich.

In PLAIN ENVELOPE, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER. No representative is to call and bother me.

Name_____

Street_____

City_____ State_____

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.

480-L STATE STREET MARSHALL, MICH.

NEW LIFE POLICY INSURES WHOLE FAMILY FOR ONLY $1.00 PER MONTH

One Policy Protects Entire Sullivan Family, 5344 Foster Ave., Chicago, Ill.

UP TO $3,000.00 BENEFITS!

For Only $1.00 Per Month

Ages 1 to 75!
Men—Women—Children

$3,000 maximum in event of travel death as outlined in this marvelous Family Group Policy.

$2,000 maximum in event of death by auto as shown in the policy.

$1,000 maximum in event of ordinary or natural death as explained in the policy.

PAYS FOR DEATH FROM ANY CAUSE!

SEND COUPON FOR FREE DETAILS!!

FROM BABY TO GRANDPARENTS!

One Policy, One Premium, One Price!

Now you can insure your whole family at amazing LOW COST! Think of it! $1.00 per month protects entire family—husband and wife, their parents, and children! Pays benefits for death from any cause, as specified in the policy.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION! NO AGENT CALL!

No medical examination of any family member required. Just mail coupon for full details how to get the Family Group Policy for Free Inspection. No agent will call.

UNDER STATE GOVERNMENT SUPERVISION!

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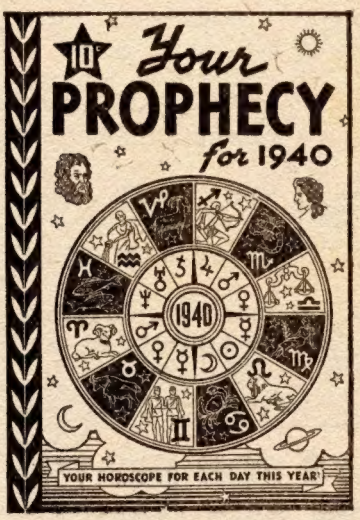

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CHAPTER I

Death Escapes

IN a shaded corner of the Texas State Prison yard squatted three convicts in dark gray. They did not join in the general talk or games but stayed apart, cursing the fate which had brought them inside these stone walls.

One, whose wrinkled, dirty suit clung damp and loose about his bones, swore with vitriolic fury.

"Five years!" he moaned, "and ten more to go! I've lost sixty pounds, and my nerves're gone. And to think we're the richest men in Texas if we could get outa this hell hole!"

One of his companions, a short squat man with disordered sandy hair and a white knife scar over one reddened eye that kept the lid always half closed, spat between thick, peeling lips. He was visioning what those remarks brought to mind—liquor, women, ease, position.

"At least that damn Ranger didn't get it, Morse," he growled.

The man called Morse who, outside

OF THE RIO

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Lone Star Terror," "Vaquero Guns," etc.

the pen, answered to the name of George Morse was the burning-eyed, murderous chieftain of this dangerous clique. Rage blazed in his small eyes at mention of the law officer who had put them where they were.

"One day I'll tear out that Ranger's guts!" he gritted, striking the wall with such force that blood spurted from his grazed knuckles. "Yeah, Bucko, some time I'll have Jim Hatfield right where I want him!"

The man who formed the trio with Morse and "Bucko" Pete was a bony fellow with crisp, curly black hair and a mouth like a painted clown's. He had a facile face which worked and twitched with his thoughts. Listening to what the other two were saying, at the same time "Crazy Jake" Flenge was absorbed in picking the wings off a large bottle fly his quick hand had snatched out of the air. Lips half open, he watched the suffering of the insect. He let it go free, and it walked over the cement, trying to fly. Flenge grinned and his face worked.

"Looka, boys," he cried. "He still thinks he can fly!"

He roared with laughter, and George Morse slapped him across the grimacing mouth.

"Stop it!" ordered Morse.

A big convict, with wide shoulders, narrow waist, and black hair that was visible under his prison cap, slouched

Goes on the Prod for a Fiendish Impostor!

near them. With a curse, Bucko Pete stuck out a foot and tripped the big man.

"What's the idea, bumpin' into me, Hargan?" Bucko snarled, leaping to his feet to scowl at the tall young prisoner, whose long face, almost stern, would have been a strong face had it not been for the breaking away of the chin.

He pushed against the wall.

"Some day," Morse gritted, glaring, "I'll carve yuh to pieces, Hargan, damn yore soul!"

All three convicts reviled "Big Dave" Hargan. He was vicious, stupid, but he was afraid of these three.

"Aw, what've I ever done to you, boys?" he whined. "Yuh've picked on me ever since I come here. I always liked you hombres. I'm gettin' out next week, and I thought—"

CRAZY JAKE FLENGE reached out and pinched Hargan's flesh between long fingernails, digging deep into the convict's brawny arm.

"Don't!" growled Hargan, shrinking against Bucko Pete, who brought up his knee and drove it into the tall man's spine.

Then, to the surprise of his chosen companions Morse suddenly came to Hargan's defense. He knocked Flenge aside with a sweep of his arm, and trod on Bucko Pete's stubby toes.

"Leave him be!" he snapped angrily. "Quit pickin' on him. He's okay! He's showed he can take it."

Big Dave Hargan stared with relieved pleasure at Morse, a strong, evil personality he had always greatly admired, despite the bullying to which the trio had subjected him.

"Thanks, Morse," he mumbled.

Morse flung an arm about Hargan's wide shoulders and grinned.

"Sit down, Hargan," said Morse kindly. "So you've had your sentence commuted, huh? Didn't kill a man?"

"Yeah, but not a-purpose. I was full a red-eye to the neck, and hit him too hard, that's all." Big Dave stared at his powerful hands.

"We owe yuh a apology," Morse went on quickly, frowning down the astounded Bucko Pete. "We got into the same sort of jam you did, killed a man in a barrom fight—that's why we got sent up here, too. A damned Texas Ranger named Hatfield happened to be in the town and captured us. The maddening part of it is that we're rich, millionaires, if only we could get out of here!" He lowered his voice to whisper: "A fortune, I tell you! Right where we can get it, Hargan."

The light of greed shone in Hargan's greenish eyes. He gulped.

"Thousands — thousands?" he repeated.

"Yeah, plenty for us all. You get us out of here and we'll split it with you. The reason we treated you the way we have is that you're a ringer for this Ranger Hatfield who sent us up. You kept remindin' us of him. Are you with us? Will you help us escape?"

"Aw right," Hargan agreed, flattered by the strong man's attention. "But how?"

For the remainder of the rest period those four convicts in the corner of the yard went into a huddle, whispering. . . .

A norther swept gritty dust against the granite walls of the Texas State Prison that dark night two weeks later. Up on the catwalk overlooking the yard, a uniformed guard, rifle in hand, bent with his back to the stinging wind. Gradually, from the shadows, a denser shadow took form, creeping toward him. A tigerish spring, and the flash of a knife sunk home deep into the guard's vitals. His broken cry quickly choked off in a death rattle, was lost in the whine of the wind.

George Morse seized the prison guard's cap, stuck it on his own bare head, picked up the rifle, and kicked the bleeding body off the high wall. He scuttled back to the rope ladder, and Bucko Pete and Crazy Jake Flenge came up. Swiftly they dropped the ladder to the other side, and swarmed down it. Guns glistened in their hands.

Another guard glimpsed them and yelled, as a shot whistled in the darkness. It spattered against the granite wall as the sentry came racing along the walk. Bucko Pete swung, levelled

the rifle Morse had handed him. A blue-red flash showed as the gun roared.

"Hey, Morse! This way!" That was Big Dave Hargan, teeth chattering with excitement, as he held the ready saddled, fast horses.

INSTANTLY the alarm was clanging, shrieking, whistling, and guards came dashing from shelter, yelling, and shooting as they came.

But the three escaping convicts, with their rescuer, leaped on the horses Big Dave had brought, and sped off into the night. . . .

Days later, with the clothes that Hargan had provided covered with dust and torn from riding the dense, thorny chaparral jungles of south Texas near the Rio Grande, the quartet of killers appeared from the bush and stared out across rolling hills.

"Yuh shore yuh remember?"

For the fiftieth time since he had smuggled guns to them, and stood by with mounts and supplies for their break from the state prison, Hargan asked that question anxiously.

"Shut up!" snapped Morse and muttered to himself: "That split live-oak and the red granite boulder with the cross—"

"What the hell're all them little trees on the hillside?" Bucko Pete suddenly demanded, wiping sweat from his leathery face.

"Changed, changed!" cried Morse, and Crazy Jake sniffled.

"Look out—here comes a waddy," warned Bucko Pete.

It was too late for the bedraggled four to duck out of sight, for the approaching cowboy had seen them and turned their way.

"Easy, now," ordered Morse. "Let me handle him. I need a fresh mount anyway."

They waited while the waddy, riding a horse with two short bars in front of a T branded on its flank, trotted up.

"Howdy, gents," the son of the range greeted cheerfully, though his glance was suspicious as he carefully took in the four dusty men. "I'm huntin' a bunch of Double Bar T cows. Seen

Jim Hatfield

anything of 'em?"

"No, we haven't," Morse said calmly, and jerked his thumb toward a not too distant ranchhouse. "Could you tell me whose place that is, over there on the next hill?"

"Huh?" the waddy said, looking the way Morse pointed, at a house, a new white hacienda. "Oh, that's Phil Barton's."

He had not turned back when Morse lunged, striking out with a knife, driving it skillfully up into the waddy's heart. Crazy Jake Flenge grasped the horse by the bridle, pinched the animal's nostrils shut, grinning at the sight of the bleeding, dying man who slumped from his seat.

"Throw him back in the chaparral," Morse commanded, which was his only comment.

They rode on, Morse in the lead. They headed down across a little stream in the bottom of a shallow valley, up another slope planted with young trees.

"Fruit trees," growled Morse. "Why, this whole country was wilderness when we were here last, boys."

"I don't like it," Bucko Pete said sourly. "Them's oranges and lemons and grapefruit too, Boss. That 'dobe house must belong to the grower.

Why, it's right in sight of our hill!"

They were all worried, but said nothing as they followed Morse, climbing up through the orchards to the summit of the hill.

"The oak's gone, and so is that big rock!" shouted Morse, as the full extent of the catastrophe—for him—struck him.

His face had turned brick-red, and he began to curse, as Hargan let out a disappointed exclamation.

"C'mon, get out your shovels and start digging!" Morse snapped. "We've got to find it."

THEY began to dig, first in one spot, then in another. It was hot work, and they cared nothing for the young trees, ruthlessly destroying those in their way, with their picks and shovels.

At first they did not see the man who came riding from the adobe hacienda. Not until he shouted at them angrily, as he saw what they were doing. As he galloped his horse toward them through the lanes, Morse quickly slid behind a tree, and watched.

"What are you fellows up to?" demanded the young rider. "You're killing my shaddock trees! They're experimental stock, the first of this particular species to be grown in the Rio Grande Valley!"

He was a handsome young man, his light hair bleached straw-color by the intense sun, and with serious deep-blue eyes and even features. He wore a white suit, wide straw sombrero and black riding boots. His belt and a Colt pistol in a pleated holster. His frown grew black as he saw the brand on the horse Morse had appropriated after killing the cowboy.

"Double Bar T, eh!" he cried. "So John Toll put you up to this!"

"Yeah," snarled Bucko Pete, his eyes glinting. "What of it?"

"It's hard to believe a cowman would go to such lengths to spite a neighbor," said the blond rider soberly. "You men get out! If you ever come back on my land I'll have you arrested."

"Tough, ain't yuh?" sneered Bucko Pete.

Crazy Jake had stealthily edged around until he stood behind the angry fruit grower. His hand slid inside his shirt, came forth gripping a razor-sharp stiletto. He grimaced as he made ready to plunge it up into the back of the young fellow sitting on his horse.

"No!" Morse cried.

Phil Barton snapped his head around. He had not seen Morse, hidden by the bushy, small tree. At the same instant he saw Crazy Jake's knife, and without stopping to shout or argue he stuck his spurs in, whirled off. Bucko and Hargan snatched out their guns, but Morse stopped them.

"Don't kill him!" snarled Morse.

Shouting for his men as he rode, Barton galloped his horse back for his house as, reluctantly, the convicts holstered their guns.

"What's wrong, Morse?" demanded Bucko Pete. "Yuh gone soft?"

"No, you fool! But don't forget, he's the man who planted these orchards. We may need him. Things're so changed around these parts we'll never be able to locate it unless we have plenty of help and time to work. We'll come back and talk to that hombre later. We better ride now. He'll be back here now with his men pronto!"

Hurriedly they mounted, galloped their scratched, sweated horses south into the chaparral. They had disappeared in the bush before Phil Barton, with his armed aides, returned to the orchard.

"He'll shore report us," said Hargan as the convict band rode on at top speed. "Bet the Rangers come huntin' us, Chief."

"I'll take care of the Rangers," declared Morse coldly.

CHAPTER II

Old Friends Meet

MORSE rode at the head of his small band, his chin sunk on chest, after they had reached a spot where they could safely slow down. The others wearily trailing after him. Desperate, pressing for time, hunting a den in which to hide from the law,

they pushed south. Then Bucko Pete, who had keen ears, reported:

"Somebody comin', Chief."

They ducked aside, hidden in bush. They were miles now below the spot where they had bumped into Barton, who had disturbed them and prevented their search, and not far from where the tawny water of the Rio Grande gleamed into the sunlight.

Cracklings of bush came, then a bunch of fat steers broke from the chaparral, herded by a dozen men in Mexican garb — peaked sombreros trimmed with rows of pearl buttons, buskskin pants, fancy spurs. Dark-faced men they were, with some breeds among them. The leader was a handsome *vaquero*, slim of waist but with long, brawny arms. He had a sharp, intelligent face, with liquid black eyes. A "dude's" small mustache was over his red-lipped, sneer-curved mouth.

In one brown hand he held a thick, black rawhide lash which he wielded, stinging a cow back into line with that expert skill of the trained mule skinner —a skill sometimes unbelievable—who could snap a man's eye out at twenty feet.

"Bueno, vaqueros!" the *bravo* called, in his deep baritone. "Drive them to the water and we cross."

"Say, that's Porfirio Gomez," whis- Crazy Jake.

"Quiet, you fool!" Morse ordered. "Stay back! There's someone over beyond."

A man wearing a white Stetson, a man with a sun-lined face and steady, pale-blue eyes, a man who had complete command and calm in his dangerous situation had spurred his black horse out, catching the rustlers from behind at just the right moment. The Winchester rifle in his hands covered Gomez, and his steady eyes fixed the chief of the cow thieves, while the gun muzzle seemed to threaten the entire gang.

"Reach, *caballeros!*" he shouted, his voice crackling sharply on the gentle west wind, aromatic with the scent of creosote and sage. "Yuh're under arrest!"

The criminal four watched the scene from the bush, saw the deep flush that

Crazy Jake Flenge

darkened Gomez' handsome face.

"Only one kind of damn fool would tackle a gang like that, single-handed," muttered Morse, "and that's a Texas Ranger!"

"Shuck yore guns, gents," drawled on the officer, his broad back solid against the cantle. "I figgered out yore little play and been waitin' for yuh. Heard yuh was collectin' tolls from the ranchers hereabouts!"

Porfirio Gomez' slim body writhed with impotent fury. He itched to strike yet dared not, for the man with the rifle had him pinned.

A foolish *vaquero*, one of Gomez' band, off to the Ranger's flank, tried it. He tried, thinking he might edge around in back of their captor. But even as he flicked his pistol to firing position, the Winchester blared and the Mexican collapsed in his leather, his side torn wide, blood gushing out in a scarlet stream.

And it was at that instant that Morse took a hand.

He fired at the Ranger, point blank. He could not miss, being only a few yards from that broad back, a perfect target for such an expert shot as he. Prison had softened him to some extent, he was still dangerous, still the deadly, brilliant-minded criminal who long had

baffled the police of Mexico and Texas.

THE Texas Ranger, who had been busy trailing and watching Gomez and his gang, had missed the approach of the dangerous bunch from the opposite direction. They had come up, screened by the thick bush. Now he took a .45 slug through the center of the spine, a slug that drove on through his lungs.

Though he was dead, his fingers convulsed again on the rifle trigger. It boomed, and ripped its lead into the dry dirt, sending up a spray of dust. Porfirio Gomez, seeing him collapsing, shrieked a curse, and his whip flicked out, caught the officer in the face. When the awful lash uncoiled, it left an empty eye socket, and a deep-purple band of lacerated flesh. The yank brought the dead man from his seat and he piled in a heap on the ground.

"Porfirio!" Morse called.

Gomez swung his handsome pinto mustang, wild as any jungle beast. He fought the horse down, excited as it was by the swift affray, with the *vaquero's* marvelous skill, then trotted to Morse. He knew that the man who had stepped from the chaparral had sent that shot which had saved him from arrest, but he had to look for a long time before he recognized a former outlaw acquaintance.

"Senor Morse!" he exclaimed then. "I theenck you een preeson, deed not know you." White teeth gleamed a welcome in a satanic smile. "You hav' change', mucho theener, compañero."

Morse merely glanced at the Double Bar T brand on the cows driven by the band. It was of no interest to him from whom they had been stolen.

He and Gomez bent over the corpse of the Texas Ranger. "Yeah, here's his badge," said Morse, holding up the silver star set on a silver circle. "I came along just in time, Porfirio."

There was no spoken invitation for the escaped convicts to join the rustler band, but by tacit understanding they rode south together, leaving the bodies of the Ranger and the rustler to the *caracaras*, the obscene-appearing Mexican buzzards already circling high in the blue.

"The Double Bar T's huntin' these cows, Gomez," Morse told the Mexican outlaw presently, remembering his first victim of the day. "We ran into one of their riders."

"Si. I drive' zem through Barton's." Porfirio grinned. "Zat mak' Barton angree. He love hees trees. Toll, who owns the Double Bar T weel trail zem to Barton's lan', couple dead ones half heeden in the bush. He stop to jaw Barton. Zey fight. Savvy?"

"I savvy. While they're arguin', you're back in Mexico."

Gomez grinned widely again and gave his attention to the drive. The cows were driven through the bloodweed and willow thickets of the shore, into the brown water, and across to Mexico.

"I teach zem Gringos who weel not pay me," declared Gomez, caressing his little mustache. "Si, either zey pay Porfirio Gomez or zey lose zeir riders and cows."

"Good idea," agreed Morse. This desperate arch-criminal, one of the worst the Southwest had ever known, was hunting a haven now, and help. He must stay free and falling in with Gomez like this looked to him like a stroke of luck out of the skies.

That night they sat drinking and carousing, around Gomez' campfire in the fastnesses of the Sierra Madres of the wild east teritory that so well afforded protection from any law. The odor of cooked beef mingled with the aromatic smell of the mesquite and sage.

"How many men you got Porfirio?" asked Morse, his face ruby red in the fire glow.

"Fifteen, twenty."

"You need more. So do we. You got a fine idea but you're handlin' it on too small a scale. I'll show you how to coin money, because there's a fortune in that protection angle you've been playing. We'll pick us a hundred tough *vaqueros* and comb Zapata County. Any rancher who won't pay, why, then rustlers hit him."

"*Si.* But, senor, you savvy zey hav' Rangers, *rurales*, tough hombres. Zat one you keel today, he was sent to trap us."

"That'll be taken care of," insisted Morse. "We'll hire our riders and start. By the time Austin gets straightened out and finds what we've done, we'll have the county sewed up."

They slept on it, and in the cool of the following morning, Gomez and Morse, with an armed escort, headed east for the Mexican villages to pick up criminals. Hargan, Bucko Pete and Crazy Jake Flenge rode behind the two chiefs.

"I know every foot of this land," growled George Morse. "Monterrey lies ahead."

"Si, Monterrey, the Government smelter and mint. But deed you know of the Red Raiders, the men who keel ten soldiers an' escape weeth mucho gold—years ago?"

Morse shrugged. "Heard of 'em Porfirio."

"Masked, deesguised, zey got away, nevaire heard of again. Si, eet was great job, Senor Morse. The Government steel hunt zat gold I theenck—"

Morse stopped him with a strong grip of fingers on his arm, reaching from horse to horse.

"Someone comin'," he whispered, and they drew up at the turn in the dirt road.

A creaking sounded on the dry, dusty air.

"Eento the bush," breathed Porfirio Gomez. "Eet may be zat strange hombre—"

The murderous devils hid, waited for the approach of their unsuspecting victim. As he came into sight around the turn, Morse raised his pistol, fired. The man on the trail collapsed, reins in hand.

"Beau-ti-ful shot, Senor Morse," complimented Gomez. "Your han' ees like steel."

They spurred their mustangs out to see what their victim had on him, paused to stare down at the short, fat man with skin ruddy as a boiled lobster shell, whom Morse had killed.

In the cruel, evil minds of these men were plans for wholesale destruction and death against the citizens of South Texas who were unlucky enough to live within striking distance of their guns.

CHAPTER III

Gunshot Welcome

DEEP lines corrugated the alligator skin of Captain William McDowell's old forehead. There were always lines there, but on this sunny afternoon, chief of the Texas Rangers was pleated above the eyes like an accordion.

He was swearing under his breath, and suddenly banged his gnarled fist on the desk so hard the inkwell and pens leaped from their places. So did the clerk sitting just outside the ancient but not yet helpless tiger's den.

"Call Ranger Hatfield!" roared McDowell. "I'll get to the bottom of this consarned mystery!"

A few minutes later a soft step sounded outside, and a man came silently into the captain's office.

"Howdy Jim," McDowell grunted, and wasted no time in preliminaries. "I know yuh're jest back from the Panhandle, Jim, but there's hell brewin' in Zapata, on the Border. Can yuh make it?"

McDowell only asked to be polite. A look at the big man standing by his desk, cool and composed, would have told anybody that Ranger Jim Hatfield was ready. And that, if it could be made, Hatfield would make it.

This greatest of Ranger stood well over six feet in his half-boots. His legs were long, powerful, the better to grip a horse's ribs. His shoulders were wide, tapering to the fighting man's hips where depended blue-steel Colt .45 revolvers in oiled black holsters, holsters well plied so there would be no sticking when the guns flashed out.

Bronzed as a golden god, Jim Hatfield was too rugged, his face too sternly powerful for him to be called handsome, but the somnolent strength of him was a beautiful thing that caught the breath. Men and women both turned to look again at this wonderful specimen of Western manhood, the Ranger in his fighting prime.

The controlled, rippling strength of a great panther rested in those long muscles. Unlike so many large men,

Hatfield could move with lightning speed. His slim, strong hands could flash to those Colts with unbelievable accuracy.

"Yes, suh," he drawled in answer to his chief, his voice soft, with a Texan's avoidance of any harsh consonant. "I'm ready."

"I know damn well yuh are," muttered McDowell, running his hand across his furrowed brow.

Too old to ride the hell trails himself, old Cap'n Bill, who would charge hell with a thimblefull of water, must send forth his lieutenant now.

Those gray-green eyes under the straight-set Stetson of the great Ranger were unclouded as a summer's sky. They could, however, as McDowell was aware, darken with an icy storm that meant death for the evil who defied the Law of the Lone Star State. The stern features were softened now because the wide mouth was in good-natured repose.

"Somethin' queer's goin' on in Zapata County," McDowell explained, rattling the papers before him. "Weeks ago complaints begun comin' in, local, few miles west of Zapata town on the Rio. John Toll of the Double Bar T, was one wrote 'bout a Mex outlaw who was demandin' money from the settlers and ranchers. If they didn't pay, then they was struck at night, lost cows, had their barns burnt. I sent Ranger Lew Thorn, a good man, down there to look into it. Here's his reports. He says he identified the bandit chief as a Mex named Porfirio Gomez, and tracked Gomez to the Rio. From information he got in Zapata town, he found Gomez has a hideout in the Sierra Madre range acrost the river. He was hot on Gomez' trail. . . . But look at this."

THE lithe, powerful Hatfield stooped over the desk, glancing rapidly at the scrawled reports his fellow officer had mailed to Austin.

"Handwritin' shore took a change for the worse, Cap'n," he remarked.

"Yeah. Read on—yuh'll see Thorn says he got his arm caught between a hitchin' post and his buckin' horse, and cracked a bone so he couldn't write. Had to wear it in a sling. A feller's been writin' his reports for him. Bartender at the Western World Saloon."

There was a hot epistle signed "John Toll." In a bold hand had been written:

> I thought the Tex. Rangers was good men. No longer. Murders go on here and these damn farmers ruinin' the range. As for yore Jim Hatfield, he's a lyin', ornery skunk. He's gone altogether bad. If he's the kinda Ranger you stock, I'll pay you to keep 'em in Austin.

The gray-green eyes shadowed.

"I saw Toll at a stockgrower's meetin' once," remarked Hatfield.

"A puzzle, Jim. You ain't been within five hundred miles of Zapata the past year. Yet here's another complaint 'bout yuh!"

Hatfield glanced at the letter from the south. It read:

> Jim Hatfield is a cruel killer. He nearly finished my brother, who never did anyone any harm—

That was signed by a woman.

"Sounds as though yuh'd been ridin' in two places at once, and actin' like two diff'rent fellers," growled McDowell. "We got to clear the Rangers' name, Jim. Hell's busted loose along the Rio, complaints're pourin' in from Zapata. Yuh can trust Dan Young of Zapata town, if yuh need information. He's an ex-marshal and we rode the express stages together in the old days. Never was a better man with a shotgun. Get to the bottom of it, now."

Jim Hatfield swung on his spurred heels. The easy poise of the famous Ranger's fighting body gave Cap'n McDowell a sense of satisfaction as, from a window, he watched the magnificent golden sorrel nuzzling the Ranger's slim, gentling hand. The tall man swung into leather with the born rider's movements.

The sorrel whinnied as the rider turned his velvet nose southwest, headed for Zapata, where dark mysteries of murder and thievery showed tantalizing glimpses above the black surface of the hidden outlaw slough, as an octopus' slimy arms might break above a dark sea.

Winchester snugged in saddle boot, crooning low to Goldy, the handsome sorrel that was friend companion to the Ranger, and with six-guns nestling in holsters at creased hips, Jim Hatfield galloped for the Rio Grande and against the most devilish criminal opponents he had ever happened to come up against.

Hours later, the golden sorrel and his rider paused at the brink of a clear flowing rill.

rel's hide from branches and thorns. Dismounting at the rill, Hatfield took off his Stetson, while Goldy drank nearby, and began washing up.

They were in bush here, in the thorny chaparral ribboned with winding trails that jungled southeast Texas above the Rio and through Mexico to the mountains.

Save for ranch clearings or other man-made areas, the chaparral had its way throughout the land.

Jim Hatfield brought his gun down sharply on the Mex's head (Chap. XVIII)

"Reckon this is the spot to wash off some of this dust," Hatfield told Goldy. "We're right close to Zapata town now."

The run down from the state capitol, headquarters of Captain McDowell, had been accomplished with incredible dispatch, and both horse and horseman showed the effects of the gruelling run. White and red dust plastered them, and there were scratches on the sor-

JUST as he bent to wash dust off his bronzed, powerful arms, a bullet spanged within an inch fraction of his head. It came so close that it nipped at strands of his black hair, and plugged on, making a whipping sound in the bush across the brook.

The Ranger's action was so swift that it was instinctive. He seemed to flatten out and yet he turned, and the sunlight, striking down through the

low foliage, glinted on the six-shooter which came to his hand with the speed of legerdemain. Hammer spur back under long thumb, he faced the unseen drygulcher who had sent the rifle bullet his way.

A mesquite bush stirred slightly to his right, fifty yards away. There was a narrow avenue through the chaparral, and Hatfield judged the slug had come from that direction. He fired his six-shooter into the bush, heard a man give a yip of pain, heard the scrabbling of heels and the breaking of sticks. Leaping up, he ran at the mesquite, fired a second one to spoil his enemy's aim.

A few moments later he heard the thud of horse's hoofs. He had reached the spot where the drygulcher had squatted, and saw the slight depressions in the soft earth, the flattened grass where the man's weight had pushed it down.

Then, down a slope southward he glimpsed the cowboy who had tried to shoot him. The fellow's mustang was tearing full-tilt away, rider bent low, looking back over his shoulder with pain-twisted face. He wore waddy clothes, Stetson and shirt, red bandanna, heavy leather chaps, halfboots. His right arm hung limp at his side while he held his reins with his left. Hatfield saw a dark blotch on his blue shirt—blood from a flesh wound where the Ranger's bullet had bitten.

"Double Bar T," read Hatfield, observing the brand on the mustang's flank.

He held his fire. Expert at judging men he thought the rider on the chestnut looked like a simple puncher, a rough but a decent enough person, not the sort to kill a law officer unless—

"Unless mebbe that there double of mine's at it agin," he murmured. For, from the strange reports coming out of Zapata, he was convinced someone must be impersonating him. "Double Bar T's John Toll's outfit. Reckon this is his range. That was a close one. Wonder if he meant to crease me or would he have gone the whole way?"

He shrugged off his narrow squeak, and let the waddy head on into the chaparral. Returning to Goldy, he finished watering the sorrel, and cleaning himself. Mounting, he trotted on southward.

The sun was lowering in the western heavens as Hatfield followed the waddy's trail. There was a sense of peace in the chaparral wilderness. The thorny bush covering the world cut off vision so that one could never be certain just what might pop up. But the aromatic air was bracing and bright-colored butterflies flitted over the flowers, beady-eyed rattlers lay silently waiting for victims. An Imperial woodpecker, a rare and beautiful sight, winged across the tall man's vision.

To the south a flock of crows set up an alarmed cawing, and the Ranger's gray-green eyes sought the black specks that gave warning of something below. Dust hazed the blue there, and as the land dropped into the Rio Grande Valley, he heard gunshots and shouts that caused him to head southwest.

A FIGHT was going on down there. The Ranger, on Goldy, burst out from thick bush and stared down at the rocky plain, where only cactus plants and mesquite could take hold. About thirty riders, masked men in Mexican clothing—form-fitting jackets and pants and steeple-crowned sombreros—and mounted on the hairy mustangs of the south, were whooping it up, riding Indian fashion in a circle around a rock pile near the center of the clearing. A couple of Double Bar T mustangs went galloping across, out of the gunfire, kicking their heels, ears back with fear, two more lay still on the stones near the rock nest; a fifth was writhing with a mortal wound.

For a minute the tall Ranger observed the scrap. From the horses he figured there were five or six waddies, evidently Double Bar T men, holed up in the rocks, and the Mexes were trying to take them. Lying across a flat boulder he saw a still corpse with Stetson awry—a dead cowpuncher the Mexican gang had hit. Colt sixes banged from the rocks where the cowboys were putting up a stiff, valiant defense.

"That stocky hombre rides like a Texan," Hatfield muttered, watching one of the band's chiefs who was egging the rest on.

The fellow wore red velvet and Mexican hat, but the Ranger decided that he was an American in disguise. He was broad and short and, as he came galloping madly around the ring, firing in at the besieged, the Ranger saw the man's half-closed right eye. A stirring of his keen memory came to him, but suddenly he was too engaged with what occurred to think back and recall what it was.

"Reckon I can take a hand in this," he murmured, drawing both Colts.

The stocky hombre had swung out of line, full-speed ahead.

"Hey, Hargan!" he bawled, seeing the tall man on the golden sorrel. "We got some of them Toll fellers in there. C'mon, we're goin' to finish 'em off!" There was grim defiance in his shout as he added: "We'll show Toll who's king in these parts! At 'em, *vaqueros!*"

They poured deadly volleys at the rocks. Fragments of stone spat up, and dust rose. A shriek of anguish told that another Double Bar T waddy had taken lead.

A bony fellow with the Mex crowd, riding a black horse, wheeled out of line and started toward Hatfield. The Ranger could see only the glittering eyes over the bandanna mask. The hat was pulled down to the brows, and heavy leather covered his body.

"Hey, Dave!" the bony man said, in a queer voice, muffled by the cloth. "Look at that wounded feller kickin'! Funny, ain't it?"

He roared with raucous laughter at the sight.

Hatfield spurred Goldy toward the red riders of death. There was something about his bearing, the long lines of the grim face, the businesslike way he held his guns, that alarmed the bony man, who cursed, and half swung away.

"Dave!" he shrieked. "What the hell's wrong?"

He threw his body down along his horse. "Pete!" he bellowed, digging in his spurs. "That ain't Hargan! It's that damn Ranger!"

CHAPTER IV

Zapata Town

HATFIELD'S eyes widened. "So they know me," he thought.

The circle of killers was closing in on the rocks and only scattered shots came from the defenders now.

"Out of bullets, I reckon," decided Jim Hatfield.

He sent a quick shot that caught the bony man in the forearm and forced him to drop the pistol he raised at the Ranger. Bucko Pete who, though the Ranger did not know it was the stocky man, had turned at Crazy Jake Flenge's shriek of warning. He took in the approaching officer on the golden sorrel.

"Swing and get him, *vaqueros!*" he howled.

Jim Hatfield's twin Colts blasted the line with accurate, deadly fire. The big revolvers spat leaden death, and every missile struck flesh, tearing nerves and muscle, cracking bone.

Hatfield felt the stinging breath of the return fire. A bullet bit a hole in his Stetson crown, jerking at his chin strap. Another cut through the sleeve of his shirt, burning the skin. A third nicked a chunk from his saddle cantle, an inch from his thigh.

But he had made several hits, and holes appeared in the line of raiders. The shrieks of the wounded Mexicans threw their mates off aim. Rattled by the cool effrontery and fighting skill of Hatfield, the circle hesitated, then broke and started to retreat.

Crazy Jake Flenge already was riding hell-for-leather south, moaning and holding his wounded arm. Hatfield held up Goldy for a minute, swinging aside while he reloaded his revolvers. The blue-steel pistols glinted in the golden light of the late afternoon. Two waddies showed in the rock nest, turning their last bullets on the retreating Mexicans.

Hatfield, pistols filled again, galloped after the fast mustangs. From the west he heard shouts and, turning, saw thick dust rising as horsemen rapidly approached.

As he took up pursuit of the rattled

raiders who had no stomach for such battle as the Ranger offered, he heard the yelling closer up. Then a band of riders, on Double Bar T horses, burst from the trail, led by a tall, lean, weather-beaten man with intense, deep-set blue eyes.

John Toll of the Double Bar T, the Ranger decided at once. Toll was a hard-bitten old Texan pioneer in corduroy riding pants with leather chaps and leather jacket, and with a black Stetson set straight on his graying head. His long jaw and curved nose gave him a pugnacious look. He sat his big horse as naturally as a centaur. Now, in anger, his face was beet-red under its deep tan.

"There's that damn Ranger!" roared Toll, sending a shot that whirled close over Hatfield's head.

He set spurs to his mustang, and with a bunch of his men following—there were a dozen punchers with him—started after Hatfield.

"Hey, Boss—Boss!"

One of the waddies Hatfield had saved was yelling at Toll, but the Double Bar T rancher only waved back. The whistle of wind in his ears, his intenseness of purpose to catch up with the big fellow on the golden sorrel, kept Toll from hearing what the cowboy called after him.

"He druv' 'em off, saved us!" yelled the cowboy, but still Toll did not hear.

AHEAD, the gang with Bucko Pete was riding hell-for-leather toward the Rio Grande. For two miles they sped on, with the last minutes of daylight close. Rounding a curve, with the acrid dust thick in his notrils, Jim Hatfield ran into a small army of *vaqueros*.

They had been driving a bunch of Double Bar T cows to the ford across the Rio. Now, warned by the gang which had beset the waddies, who had evidently caught the rustlers at work and tried to stop it, only to be attacked and holed into the rocks, the great force of *vaqueros* swung on Jim Hatfield.

"There he is—that's him," cried Bucko Pete, pointing with his gun at the man on the golden sorrel.

The man at whom he was yelling a handsome *bravo*, with a wasp waist, who carried a long blacksnake whip under his brawny arm. The sharp intelligent face of the Mexican was visible, for he had not yet pulled up his mask. Hatfield caught the gleam of the black eyes, the twitch of the little mustache over the sneering, curved mouth.

Porfirio Gomez cracked the heavy bullwhip.

"At zem, *vaqueros!*" he roared, digging in his spurs. "Fire!"

A blast of gunshots that roared like a tornado in the hot air punctured the wilderness quiet.

"Reckon we ain't welcome either way in these parts," muttered Hatfield, but there was no hint of fear in his calm voice. He swung Goldy to retreat the way he had come. He had gone but a few hundred yards when John Toll came tearing up on his lathered horse, bellowing a command to the Ranger to halt. The Double Bar T owner fired at Hatfield as a warning. Then he saw the great mob of Mexicans, urged on by only the snaky Gomez, and with a curse of startled fury, pivoted his horse on a dime and started to run for it. His men, coming up in line, saw their boss running, then they got a look at the fierce Mexes, coming full-tilt, guns cracking.

Hatfield shrugged, as a waddy fired at him, the bullet coming too close for comfort. Both sides considered him an enemy, and he rounded a curve in the trail, out of sight of the Mexicans. He spoke softly to the sorrel, and Goldy threw himself sideward against the wall of thorned bush. The chaparral gave way with a pop, lost in the din of gunfire. Hatfield kept on going, out of the line of the battle, fetching up to the east on a grassy knoll from which he could look down and glimpse some of the chase.

"Hope them Double Bar T hosses is good'n fast," he murmured dryly.

Toll and his men were fighting a running defense, shooting back as they headed for home and mother. They had picked up the survivors in the rocks, and were riding west toward the ranch.

Porfirio Gomez and his hombres chased them for two or three miles, before swinging back toward the Rio Grande. And night suddenly dropped over the valley.

Brushing himself off and attending to the scratches he had taken, the Ranger talked it over with the golden sorrel, who seemed to understand what he said and to agree, with sniffs or nuzzlings of his velvet nose.

"HARGAN—why, I never heard of him. Dave Hargan. Dave Hargan. Wonder who he is? He shore must look like me, 'cause even his mates figgered I was him when I just rode up. 'Pete'—that lanky hombre called that name to that stocky devil. And I wonder jest who that good-lookin' Mex bandit can be? Mebbe Porfirio Gomez himself."

He led Goldy east, hit a narrow deer trail that brought him to a wider road which followed as well as the contour of the country allowed, the twisting course of the Rio Grande. Along the bluffs, dipping up and down, Hatfield rode east for Zapata town to contact Dan Young, Captain McDowell's old pal. It was his habit to look about before going into action, and plenty of looking seemed to be required now.

About 11 P. M. he saw sparkling lamplights ahead, picking out the town on the bluffs above high-water mark. From the right, as the trail meandered down to the river, where the ford was, sounds attracted his keen attention. He turned the sorrel that way, and under the moonlight made out dark figures on the reed-fringed shore. He watched for a time, from the bush, as men in sombreros pushed a buckboard to dry ground, hitched up a horse to it. Then they retired, save for one man who got into the wagon and drove up the rocky road.

"Now what the hell's the idea of that?" the Ranger muttered.

He swung in after the buckboard, only close enough to see the outline of the driver.

They passed the Mexican hovels on the town's outskirts, so familiar in a cowtown. The town of Zapata proper consisted of a large plaza, wind-

Marshal Young prodded the Ranger with his six-gun (Chap. V)

swept and bare save for some scrub bush. Around this space were wooden and adobe buildings, stores and saloons, most of them one-story, some with false seconed-story fronts. Continuous wooden awnings shaded the wooden walks, extending over the hitch-racks to protect inhabitants and horses from the hot sun of day.

Saddled beasts and wagons, stood about. The man in the buckboard who had crossed from Mexico in the night was not far ahead when the Ranger rode into town. Hatfield saw him throw his leather reins over the rail, and limp across the walk to enter Red Queen Saloon, largest of the bars. As the light shaft hit the lean, round-shouldered figure, the Ranger noted the lurching gait; the man was quite lame.

He wore a black suit and a dark hat, white shirt and string tie.

Violin music and the lightness of women's laughter mingled with the deeper notes of celebrating men. Hatfield's throat was as dry as dust from the exercise he had had, so he wasted no time in ducking under the hitch-rail and hitting the batwing doors. His long legs took him to the bar. Men crowded about, feet on the rail, facing the mirror while sawdust crunched underfoot.

In rear rooms steel-eyed gamblers took the suckers' money.

The lame man, whose black hair showed under a narrow-brimmed, straight-set hat, drew the eyes of the curious, and Hatfield reached the front end of the bar without being noticed. The lame fellow's speech riveted attention on him.

He had a pronounced English accent, a shrill voice.

"Whisky-soda, my good man," he ordered.

A snicker ran down the line. The bartender assumed an air of exaggerated politeness.

"Yes, Duke, here y'are," he replied. "In this town we got it awready mixed in the bottle."

He shoved a flash of red whiskey at the Englishman, who tasted it. A wry look appeared on his face.

"I say, there's no soda in this stuff," cried the lame Britisher. "It burns like lava!"

Everybody laughed. The barkeeper, pleased with his own wit, swung to serve Jim Hatfield. "Whiskey," he quietly ordered. "And say, can yuh tell me where to find Dan Young?"

THE barkeep stared at him. He started slightly as he looked over his shoulder with a worried expression on his broad face.

"Get!" he whispered. "Get, Mister!"

"Hey, there he is!" somebody shouted.

The Englishman, with the rest, turned to look at the tall man at the end of the bar. Angry growls rose from the Texans as they started to bunch up on Hatfield. The Ranger felt the hostility and instantly diagnosed it.

"Reckon that Dave Hargan jigger has been here," he decided.

"Tar and feather him!" roared an angry bass voice.

"Naw, git a lasso! Let's lynch the sidewinder!"

Hatfield saw hands flying for Colts. In a moment it would be too late to act, but the Ranger did not lose that single moment. As by magic his blue-steel revolvers flashed into his slim hands, hammers back under thumbs. The steady, gray-green eyes darkened as he faced the mob, held them. Those in front recoiled before that look, stepping on the toes of men pushing from behind, demanding Hatfield's hide.

"Don't get excited, gents," drawled the Ranger. "I'll shoot the first man that draws a gun!"

As they paused under his barrels he backed to the batwings, shoved out, leaped aside, and hit the ground at the side of the porch. He did not wish to hurt anybody. They were citizens of Texas, men he had sworn to protect. He knew these people, was aware they must have a strong motive for acting as they were. If they left him hanging to a tree, it would cause them pain when later they found it a case of mistaken identity—but that would be too late!

CHAPTER V

Neighbors Disagree

EXCITED men were shooting through the door, but Jim Hatfield was out of range, ducking down the alley between the saloon and a store. There was a side door, which led into the bar, at his left. It was closed, dark.

As Hatfield slid past the portal, a man jumped out from the shadow where he had been pressed out of sight at the side of the door, and jammed a Colt muzzle into Hatfield's back ribs.

"Reach!" he growled. "So yuh wanted to see me!"

It was a steady voice, strong with a brave man's lack of fear, and the gun knew an expert touch. A good trick, slipping out, waiting there, figuring the big man would come this way. Dan Young heard Hatfield ask for him.

There was, of course, an answer to that. With the gun so close there was one chance in fifty that the Ranger could whirl and knock it aside before the fingers could close on trigger. But Jim Hatfield did not take that chance, as he would have ordinarily.

"Yuh're Dan Young, ain't yuh?" he asked calmly. "I wanta talk to yuh. McDowell sent me down here."

"Huh!" The gun muzzle stayed dug into the flesh of the Ranger's ribs. "Bill musta gone loco in his old age, lettin' a man like you tote a Ranger badge!"

Yells came from the street. Men had piled out of the saloon, hunting the quarry.

"We ain't got but a minute," Hatfield said, his voice level and low. "This is a case of mistaken identity, Young. Some hombre is posin' as me. Let's go somewheres and talk it over."

Dan Young hesitated. "All right," he agreed. "Walk ahead, but keep yore hands where I can see 'em."

"All right, Marshal."

Quickly, Hatfield strolled on to the back alley. Piles of tin cans, tossed from the back doors, lay in the narrow track while the black shapes of stables loomed across the way.

"Turn right," commanded Dan Young. "When yuh come to the third house on yore right, open the back door and walk in."

Hatfield did as ordered. He waited inside the dark room as Dan Young, gun ever ready, stepped in with him.

"Strike a match," growled Young from the shadows, "and let's see yore face again."

Hatfield moved slowly. The match scratched and the yellow flare lit the grim-lined countenance of the great officer. Dan Young cursed.

"Light that there candle on the kitchen table," he commanded.

Hatfield touched the burning stick to the blackened wick of the candle

[*Turn Page*]

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky . . . I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

stub, and sat down in a wooden chair, putting both his hands on the table. Dan Young, old as he was, could still handle a six-shooter and he was gun-wise.

Young was slight and wizened, with a deep-lined hide, sparse white hair, and the pale, steady eyes of a gunfighter. Blue veins traced courses on his hand as he gripped his old-style Colt with its rebated, hard-steel cylinder. He wore a brown shirt, blue pants, and black boots into which his trouser ends were tucked. He took the Stetson from his brow, wiped sweat off with the back of his left hand.

"Doggone if I can savvy it," he remarked. "Yuh're like as two peas with the hombre who's been raisin' hell in these parts. Ev'rybody was stumped 'bout him. It ain't like Rangers to act so, but we figgered he'd been bribed and had gone bad. Lemme see yuh closer."

"Help yoreself." Hatfield shrugged, rolling a quirly.

After a minute, Dan Young laid the Colt on the table.

"Never got a real close look at yuh afore—or at this double yuh claim is runnin' around loose. But—I'll take a chance, feller. For after all I ain't got many more years to ride the trail." He fetched a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

"Have a drink," he invited, "and let's hear what yuh got to say."

HATFIELD poured himself three fingers and drank.

"First," he asked, "where's Ranger Lew Thorn?"

"Thorn? Why, he came to see me weeks back, told me McDowell sent him. I put him on the track of Porfirio Gomez, the Mex bandit who's been raisin' hell in Zapata and along the Border, scarin' folks into payin' him money so's his gang won't raid their ranches and rustle their cows. Thorn was in these parts awhile, then he dropped outa sight. I figgered he'd either sashayed back to Austin or else was off in the bush."

"And when did this other hombre—the one everybody thinks is me—show up?"

Dan Young ruminated. "Why, couple days after I last seen Thorn, come to think. He rode into town, showed his Ranger badge, and said he was Jim Hatfield, come to take Thorn's place. He got in a brawl in the saloon and near kilt a man. It's shore give the Rangers a black eye, havin' such a man ridin' for 'em." Young broke off, staring into the gray-green eyes of the big man across the worn wooden table. "Now I see yuh good, yuh got a diff'rent look. Mebbe we've made a bad mistake, feller."

Men could not long be in Hatfield's company without feeling the power of the man.

"Did Thorn ever hurt his arm, that yuh knowed of?" the Ranger asked.

"Nope. I didn't hear of such happenin."

"Then," mused the Ranger softly, "the only place this here Hargan double of mine could've got that Ranger badge he was sportin' was from Thorn. Thorn wouldn't give it up 'less he was dead or they laid him out."

He had been thinking swiftly. As a supposed Ranger, Dave Hargan could gain valuable information, enter places that known bandits would never dare approach. He could help Gomez make collections, delay the due processes of the law.

"Whoever put Hargan up to it," he said ruminatively, "shore knows me. Mebbe it's somebody I run into before who's got it in for me."

Steps pounded in the alley. Quickly the Ranger rose, glided to the darkness of an inner hall, while Dan Young answered the knock on the door. A bunch of citizens stood there, two with burning pitch torches. Guns bristled in their hands—sawed-off shotguns, pistols.

"Hey, Dan, did yuh see that Ranger skunk come thisaway?" one loud voice demanded. "We want his hide to nail to the fence."

"Why, no—ain't heard a thing, gents," replied Young.

But they did not leave. Sullen glances fixed the old marshal's tiny, wizened body.

"This here gent we got with us, and others, heard him ask the barkeep for

yuh," growled the angry spokesman.

The lame Englishman was there, and others from the Red Queen, hunting the town for the big man they had seen in the barroom.

"Search the place if yuh don't b'lieve me!" shouted Young loudly, angrily.

Hatfield took the hint. He slid to the front of the house as the lynch party entered the back, and found an open window that let him into a dark side way. Goldy was near, and came to him at a whistle. To shield Dan Young, the Ranger worked some yards off before he set up a loud war cry, riding the golden sorrel up and down the plaza.

It quickly drew the attention of those hunting him. Answering shouts, and then bullets came at him. But he was too wary for them. Even as pounding feet raced for the hitch-racks, Goldy's galloping hoofs were taking the hunted Ranger far out of reach of his unexpected enemies. . . .

* * * * *

PHILLIP BARTON rose with the sun, as was his habit. After a cold bath he had breakfast and stepped out into the glorious sunlight bathing the Rio Grande Valley with red gold, a gold more precious in his estimation than the metal men fought and died for. He loved that visitor, and he loved his house that was adobe, painted white, low and rambling, in Spanish style.

Barton was a stalwart man, clean-limbed and strong. His light hair gleamed in the early sunlight and his handsomely even features gave testimony to glowing health.. His strong eyes swept the mighty horizon from the hilltop, where his beloved orchards were near the house, south to the Rio with the blue mountains of Mexico in the distance beyond. Drawing in a deep breath of the aromatic air, Barton started for the corral.

He had a full quota of men working for him; some Texans he had trained in horticultural work, others Mexicans who did manual labor.

"Mornin', Boss!" his foreman, Mac Vale, a dour Scotchman, sang out. "Where we workin' today?"

"South orchard," replied Barton. "The limes need water, MacVale. Be sure the boys bring along their guns. There was another gunfight yesterday. I wish the law would catch up with that Gomez bandit, and I wish John Toll would keep his cows on his own range."

He saddled up a powerful gray gelding, an animal he enjoyed using, and started out ahead of his men. He had not ridden far when he sighted some cows, with a Double Bar T brand, chewing the tender bark from young trees to the west. His face darkened, and he swung the gray horse to chase the animals off his land.

As he came up over the brow of a dome-like hill, he saw a woman, afoot, bending beside a white mare. He did not stop then, however, until the steers he chased had raised their tails and galloped west, out of the orchard, leaping the irrigation ditches and hightailing it for the home range.

Then Barton swung toward the woman, and she turned as he pulled up close to her. She smiled up at him, and he was startled to see how beautiful she was. Young, she was, perhaps not yet twenty, with an exquisitely formed small body. Her dark hair was fastened in braids under her new light-colored Stetson and she wore riding clothes. Barton's dazzled gaze saw large brown eyes, full red lips, and a complexion like peaches and cream, for the sun had not touched her skin with browning fingers.

"Good morning," she said, and her voice fitted her whole appearance.

Removing his hat with a swift gesture Phil Barton quickly dismounted.

"You're having trouble with your horse?" he asked. "Is it a stone?"

"Yes, a bad one," she nodded. "Worked in under the shore of his forehoof. I can't get it out. It's jammed."

"Then let me try," he said eagerly.

Barton had a way with animals, just as he did with plants, with all natural things. With his pocketknife he pried out the sharp stone wedged in the hoof, which had made the white mare so lame se could no longer walk. He hammered the shoe back into place as best he could with the butt of his revolver. Since he had nearly been killed on his

own land he never went out without arms now. Then he turned to the girl.

"Will you come to the house and have something cool to drink, an something to eat?" he asked.

SHE smiled, and nodded as she thanked him. They rode at a slow gait, beside each other, on their way to the 'dobe house.

"Are these all your trees?" she asked presently.

"Yes, they are are," he said gravely. "Most of them are citrus fruits—lemons, limes, oranges, grapefruit. I have several experimental orchards. That one over to the east, on the hillside, is shaddock grapefruit, a pink-fleshed variety that's delicious."

He talked on, speaking with swift energy and betraying the love he had for the soil and growing things. The girl listened, watching the play of his handsome young features, catching the light in his blue eyes.

"You do love them, don't you?" she said softly, as he paused. "I do, too—now that you've told me about them. It's really fascinating, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. And this country is perfect for them, too. I come from the East, where there isn't so much room, and where the frost makes citrus fruit growing impossible."

When they reached Barton's home, the young woman admired its Spanish beauty enthusiastically, as well as the view from the hilltop. Barton told his men to go ahead, that he would join them later.

"We've had a lot of trouble lately," he observed, as he escorted her into the house and called to his Mexican servant. "Perhaps you may have heard of Porfirio Gomez, the bandit?"

"I've been away at school," she replied, "but I've heard about it. You must be Phillip Barton, then."

He flushed, smiled at her. "I've been talking to you and didn't even introduce myself! Yes, I'm Phil Barton. And you?"

"Dorothy Toll," she said calmly, looking straight into his eyes. "I found a broken place in our wire and trailed some of our cows over here, when my horse went lame."

Barton's face darkened for a moment. He glanced quickly at her, but she seemed unaware there was a budding feud between her father and himself. Besides, her young beauty, her sweetness, would have disarmed anyone.

"Don't you run any cattle at all?" she asked.

"Well, I have a small herd," he told her, "that I keep well-fenced, north of here. My main interest is in growing trees."

"I see."

She dropped her eyes, and he could observe her more closely, the soft strands of hair that fluffed about her temples, escaped from the tight braids wound about her head. He noted the way her lips moved as she tasted the home-grown fruit he brought for her. He was eager for her approbation, and regretted the friction that existed between John Toll and himself.

The time sped swiftly. Before an hour had passed they felt as though they had been friends for a long time. But then something broke sharply into their calm serenity. With the sudden sound of beating hoofs, came shouts of a man's voice, then a pistol shot cracked on the air.

Barton leaped to his feet, hastening for the door. Dorothy Toll rose and slipped past him to the wide veranda.

"It's father!" she exclaimed, and lifted her voice to call: "Hello, Dad!"

The long, lanky Toll was sitting a wild mustang, a black stallion that snorted and fought control, but the rancher was a magnificent rider and kept his seat without visible effort, facing Phil Barton. Deep-red blood suffused Toll's face as he glared at the young fruit-grower.

"DOROTHY," Toll cried harshly, "come down, offa there! What do yuh mean by enterin' that whippersnapper's house?"

"Father, Father!" she said gently, standing in front of Barton. "Mr. Barton's been very kind. My horse went lame and he helped me, brought me here and gave me some delicious fruit."

Toll, like most Texans, was outspoken and did not hesitate to say what was in his mind.

"He's a damn farmer!" he shouted, face red as a beet.

Suddenly he threw himself from his leather seat, dropping his reins to ground, and glaring past his daughter at Barton.

"Look!" he cried. "Another one of my men, found daid in yore orchards!"

A dozen riders, hard-bitten punchers, were bunched behind the owner of the Double Bar T. Across a horse's back rested a corpse. A bullet hole in the temple was black and ominous.

Barton's anger would not allow him to restrain himself longer. Such an unjust accusation as that infuriated him. He stepped past Dorothy and to the ground, before John Toll.

"You know that's a lie, Toll!" he declared indignantly. "I'm no murderer and neither are any of my men! We'll defend ourselves, but we don't shoot unless shot at. If you'd keep your cows behind your fences, and your riders off my land, I'd be pleased!"

Toll had a scabbed bullet sear across one cheek. He also had a flesh wound in the left arm, the bandage bulging his shirt sleeve.

"Yuh're aidin' and abettin' them bandits is what I believe," Toll accused, between gritted teeth. "Yuh let 'em use yore range to hit me. And no man ever called me a liar to my face and didn't pay for it! You're goin' to pay for that—now!"

CHAPTER VI

An Unpleasant Reception

BEFORE the horrified girl could step between them, John Toll struck, his fist flashing to Barton's jaw. Bone cracked against bone, and Barton was staggered by the force of the Texan's punch. He nearly fell as his legs hit the porch steps.

He recovered instantly, though, and eyes blazing, his big fists clenched as he stepped at John Toll. Then, by almost superhuman effort, he managed somehow to regain his self-control.

Toll was standing ready for him, arms limp at his side. The punchers watched, some with hands on guns. From the back yard, Barton's followers, armed with rifles and shotguns, were hurrying out, and a bloody fight that would go to the finish threatened to break.

"Don't!" begged Dorothy, agonized appeal in her tone. "Oh, please don't!"

She quickly seized Barton's hand, looked up into his face pleadingly. She did not miss the trickle of blood that came from his smashed lip.

"I'm sorry, terribly sorry!" she choked. "He doesn't know what he's doing! There's been so much trouble lately, my father is frantic. Please forgive him."

"I ain't askin' his forgiveness," Toll snarled. "If he wants a fight, let him make it now!"

It was hard for Phil Barton to refuse the rancher's challenge. Only the girl's sympathy, the touch of her gentle hand, made it possible for him to keep his senses. Toll was much older than Barton, and the fruit rancher did not have killer blood in him anyhow.

"Father," Dorothy said quietly, "mount and ride home."

"Come on, then, if the dude's scairt," sneered Toll.

Barton's men were ready for a fight —aching for it. All they wanted was a signal from their boss. Young Barton was sorely humiliated, but in Dorothy's eyes he saw the pain that the conflict would cause her.

"All right, Dad, I'm coming," Dorothy called. She pressed Barton's hand, left him, quickly mounting her mare.

Toll shrugged as Barton turned his back and went up on his veranda. The Double Bar T outfit, with dry grins on their bronzed faces, swung west, and Dorothy Toll rode in the drag. She swung in her saddle at the brow of the western ridge to wave a small hand back at Barton.

When they were out of sight, Barton entered the *hacienda,* and bathed his sore jaw in cool spring water. He was furious at John Toll, but as he thought it over most of his humiliation left him, and he was glad he had not precipitated a deadly gunfight between his men and those of his neighbor, John

Toll. He remembered the grateful look in Dorothy's soft eyes.

"After all," he muttered, "Toll's her father, and I suppose he is frantic, as she said. Things are a mess hereabouts."

Pulling himself together he went out, mounted and started south to join his workers in the lower orchards.

"I'll take a look at the shaddocks," he thought, turning toward the southeast slope. He could reach the other orchard that way, and it always soothed him to observe the progress of his trees, especially his experimental specimens.

Irrigation ditches, narrow enough for a horse to step across, checker-boarded the ploughed land. The shaddocks were in bloom now, their large white flowers lifting to the sun. The broadly winged petioles of the flowers made them easy to identify, even to a novice, and Phillip Barton was an expert at tree culture. He had set out many of these trees with his own hand, and supervised the planting of the rest.

CROSSING sweeter-pulped varieties with the pink-fleshed shaddock to obtain a large, pleasant tasting hybrid fruit he hoped would be called after himself was one of his highest ambitions. True shaddock was pear-shaped, but Barton was developing a globose variety.

His water, for home use and for the necessary irrigation of the trees, came from great springs in the hills to the north, flowed from the higher ground by gravity through narrow wooden flumes and stone-lined ditches to any desired point in his orchards. Sweeping down a dirt track into the vale, he began to climb the gentle slope.

Butterflies of brilliant hue, honeybees, insects of many kinds, with the birds that hunted them, winged among the blossoming citrus fruit trees.

He slowed, observing the condition of his favorite trees. He had a love for them, as for growing things, that drove him on in life, and he was happy when he was working with them.

Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation and, dismounting, walked over to a spot where he saw freshly broken branches. The trees were still young and tender, not over six feet high, and the brushing of heavy bodies, men or horses, would snap off the shoots. There were boot tracks and hoof marks in the worked ground of the lanes, and careless hands had smashed the saplings. Several of them leaned at sharp angles, their bark scraped off by hobnailed boots. He also observed the easily identifiable scars left by horses that had nibbled at the tender bark and leaves.

"Someone's been in here again last night," he growled.

Twenty or thirty of his experimental specimens were damaged. He paused, staring down at a round hole that sank deep into the soft earth, a hole an inch in diameter.

"Now what's that for?" he wondered, irritatedly.

Then he found another, a yard along, and discovered that there were a hundred or so of the holes stuck into the side of the hill. There would be root damage, obviously.

"This is the second time," he said aloud. "I'll set a guard here at night, from now on!"

He began making what repairs he could to the damaged shaddocks. For an hour he worked, regaining some of his customary calm, for he enjoyed such toil. His hands were stained with the soil and touched by the tree sap. The odor of the blossoms was pleasantly acrid in his nostrils.

Barton was whistling to himself, on his knees as he carefully raised a tree that had been knocked sideward by a boot or hoofs. He was straightening it to perpendicular, driving a stout stake he had taken from the pile at the end of the orchard line, kept there for such purpose, to support the injured shaddock.

"Hot work, ain't it?" a soft voice drawled at his elbow.

Phil Barton started, turned to look up into the brown face of a big man who stood right behind him.

"Yes, it is warm."

Barton quickly took the man in. He was well over six feet tall, with wide shoulders and narrow waist. From the fact that he wore range clothes gave

The Texas Ranger fought the drygulchers with every ounce of strength, shooting with deadly accuracy (Chap. VIII)

Barton an idea he might be one of Toll's cowboys. He had on a stained Stetson that had once been white and blue-steel six-guns bulged at his middle, depending from a black-leather belt stuffed with cartridges. His grayish eyes were fixed on the fruit-grower, and the glance made Barton uncomfortable.

Barton rose up, turning to face the tall fellow. A yellow horse stood, pawing the dirt, near the tree line.

"Would you mind moving your horse back to the road track?" asked Barton. "He's digging up the tree roots."

The big man shrugged. He had a rugged face, and black hair under the stained wide hat. The Stetson strap was tight, bunching up the flesh under his jaw.

"YUH'RE Phil Barton, aint yuh?" he asked, without answering the fruit-grower's request by word or deed.

"Yes, I am."

"Then I want a word with yuh. Yuh been bothered lately by night raiders?"

"I have," Barton said tightly. "There's a Mexican bandit named Porfirio Gomez using my land, and the Double Bar T lets its cows through into my orchards. See for yourself what happened here. I'm going to put an armed guard here at night, because these are experimental trees and I don't wish to lose them."

"A good idea," the big man drawled. "I could do that watchin' for yuh, Barton."

"Thanks," Barton said curtly, "but I'll set my own men."

"Don't talk nonsense. This here Gomez is one tough hombre. I'm gunnin' for him myself."

He opened his left hand, and Phil Barton saw a silver star, set on a silver circle.

"You're a Texas Ranger?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Name's Hatfield — Jim Hatfield. Tell yuh what I'll do. I'll hide here every night for a week, and all yuh got to pay me is a hundred dollars. I'll guarantee yuh won't have no more trouble with Gomez."

Phillip Barton frowned. "I didn't know it was necessary to pay the Rangers to keep order in the state," he said coldly. "Good morning, sir. I'm very busy at present."

He turned back to the tree he had been working on when interrupted.

But the tall man was persistent. He put a big hand on Barton's shoulder and yanked him around.

"Yuh're a damn fool, Barton!" he growled. "If yuh want pertection, yuh got to pay."

Now Barton placed the big man. Though he seldom left his orchards, he had heard stories of the Texas Ranger who had been taking tolls in Zapata for "protection" against Porfirio Gomez.

"Let go of me!" he snapped.

The big man held on. He stuck out his jaw pugnaciously.

"If yuh don't pay up, Barton, yuh'll lose a hell of a sight more trees, mebbe a barn or even yore house," he threatened. "Gomez ain't the kind to stop at even murder — and I'm the only one can stop him."

Flushing with anger, Phil Barton seized the big fellow's wrist and flung him off. The man's long face went red. He swore hotly, and his bony hand slid to his Colt butt, the weapon flashed out and up.

"So yuh hit the Law," he snarled, pinning the young fruit-grower with the round black muzzle of the revolver.

Appalled at the sudden nearness of death—the the man's burning eyes, the steady long hand, and the hammer spur back under thumb he read the fierceness of a killer—Barton stared at the gun.

As he braced himself to die, for there seemed nothing he could do about it, a high-pitched voice snapped the killer's head around.

"I say, there! What are you doin' with that lethal weapon?"

A bent, lean man, with black hair showing under his hat, and with his weight resting on one leg, stood watching them. He was behind the supposed Ranger, and he had a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. His accent was very British. As Barton and the man who claimed to be Jim Hatfield swung their eyes his way, he walked toward

them, limping with a heavy lurch, but always keeping the shotgun trained on the big man with the menacing Colt . . .

It was a tense moment for Phil Barton, when he looked into the face of Death. And it was tense for the two armed men whose guns were out, ready.

* * *

JIM HATFIELD, mounted on the golden sorrel, had easily shaken off the pursuit from the town. The unpleasantly warm reception had not taken him entirely unawares, but he was in the habit of working incognito, under cover, during the first phases of an investigation, and in Zapata everybody seemed to know him, and hate him.

"That double of mine shore has caused plenty trouble," he told the sorrel, as they whirled around the north end of the town, and sped for the chaparral to the east.

The men from Zapata had chased him, but not far, losing him in the black, torturous mazes of chaparral jungle.

He camped for the night near a water-hole Goldy smelled out, and was up at the first gray tint of the new day. After a breakfast of jerked beef and hardtack, with cool water to wash it down, he rolled himself a smoke. Then, mounting the rested horse, he swung along the trail, letting the sorrel go as he wished.

The sun was red to his right as he came upon a ranchhouse, a baked 'dobe structure, obviously belonging to poor people. He read a brand mark over the house front door — Circle 2 — carved from a wooden slab, and faded by the sun.

A wrangler, working with horses in a nearby corral, eyed the tall man on the golden sorrel. He quickly dropped what he was doing, slipped through the gate, and hurried to the house.

As Hatfield jogged toward the place, a man came out of the front door, pulling on a shirt. Front inside, Hatfield heard a baby crying, and through the open door glimpsed several larger children, the cowman's long-legged brood.

"Howdy, Ranger," the rancher said, and his eyes were nervous as he watched the tall fellow. "What's up now? I paid yuh jest last week and it took all the money I had saved up. Yuh know I got six kids, and the baby's sick."

"I'm not after money," the tall man told him softly. "Set yore mind at rest."

The rancher looked relieved but he was still chary. He kept staring at Hatfield.

"Say, yuh don't seem so much like last week, Hatfield," he finally remarked.

The strength and quiet power of Jim Hatfield made men who were decent like him, trust him. The Ranger dismounted and stepped up beside the rancher, whose hair was gray-streaked, whose face peaked from worry and trouble.

"Siddown, and I'll have the missus fetch yuh a bite," he invited. "Nuthin' but corn bread and pork, but yuh're welcome to it."

The rancher was pitifully eager to please, but he kept shooting anxious glances at Hatfield.

"I've eat," the Ranger told him, with polite thanks. "But I'll sit down. Jest what's yore name?"

The rancher blinked. "Why, yuh knowed it last week! It's Tad Burns. This is my spread. I don't savvy this, honest. Now don't git mad, Ranger, but—"

He was greatly puzzled, kept darting troubled glances at the big fellow.

"Yuh've been took in, Burns," Hatfield told him carefully. "I ain't the same man who come here last week and took yore money."

BEWILDERMENT clouded Burns' reddened eyes.

"Why, yuh — he — said he was a Ranger, and if'n I didn't pay him for pertection Gomez would steal my kids. Scairt us bad. Folks round the country figgered yuh—he'd gone bad, and was collectin' hisself plenty, and helpin' Gomez. Yuh—yuh look so much like that other feller, Mister—Mister. . . . What's yore name?"

"It's Hatfield, shore enough. I'm the real one."

The Ranger heard Burns' sad yarn. The man who was so like Hatfield had visited here and taken the rancher's hard-earned savings.

"He done shot a man on the next place," Burns informed him, "when they kicked 'bout payin'. That big jigger had been drinkin' plenty red-eye when he was here. Now I look close, I can see yuh're diff'rent—yuh got a yaller mustang, too, but a better one."

Jim Hatfield knew the Texans. They were not cowards, but would fight to the death. Yet a man like Tad Burns, with babies to protect, and faced by what he thought was a lawman gone crooked for money, would react differently from a powerful cowman like John Toll.

Gomez' gang could wipe the Circle 2 off the map in a single raid.

CHAPTER VII

Trouble in Zapata

LATER, when Hatfield rode on, he described a wide circle north, stopping at outlying ranches. At every one he was met with fear or hostility, and the same puzzlement shown by Burns. At the Lazy N, a large spread, a bunch of cowboys began shooting at him when he hove in sight, lining up for defense. He was forced to ride full-tilt to keep from indulging in a pitched battle with the very men he had ridden here to protect.

"What I need to do," he muttered, as the sorrel sped through the bush, "is to nail that double's hide to the corral fence so's everybody can savvy what's happened. They think this here sham is a Ranger gone bad, and they can't hardly believe it."

He had seen enough to line up his obvious enemies: Porfirio Gomez, Big Dave Hargan, his double.

"Reckon I'll have to pay a visit to Gomez' hideout," he decided. "But first I better try to organize these ranchers, for their own good. John Toll's the hombre I'll need."

Hatfield knew Texans. He was one himself and had worked with them for years. He sympathized with their fierce individuality, for he preferred to work alone himself. On the other hand, against outlaws who had organized, a large force under a single leader must be used.

He directed the sorrel west, heading for the Double Bar T.

Toward four o'clock, when the sun was hot in the blue sky, he approached Barton's gleaming white *hacienda*.

"Purty dry, ain't yuh, Goldy?" he muttered. "A good drink won't hurt either of us."

Near the house, in the shade of the white wall, was a buckboard with a black horse hitched to it, two men were on the veranda. The Ranger recognized one of them as the lame Englishman who had so mysteriously crossed from Mexico the previous night and whom he had trailed into town.

The second was a stalwart young fellow who suddenly sighted the big rider on the golden sorrel. He shouted hoarsely and sprang to his feet, snatching up a Winchester rifle that was standing against the rail of the porch.

"Hatfield, I told you I'd shoot you if you ever set foot on my land again!" Barton shouted angrily.

He levelled the rifle. The lame Britisher, rising, stared at the tall man on the handsome gelding.

The Ranger was a shrewd judge of men. He kept Barton fixed with his gray-green, steady eyes and came on. The clear, decent appearance of the young fruit-grower told Hatfield that this was no gunman enemy, but the kind who was intelligent, who had no blood of Cain in his veins.

"Hold yore fire, suh," the Ranger ordered easily. "I ain't goin' to draw."

He rode straight at the gun, and within speaking distance pulled up the golden horse.

"Yuh're makin' a mistake, Mister . . . What's yore name?"

"You knew what it was well enough this morning," growled Barton, "when you were going to shoot me. I believe you'd have done it, too, if Colonel Carstairs hadn't come up behind you!"

The slim, quiet hands of Texas' greatest fighting man, Jim Hatfield, rested on the tightened leather chap-

erejos covering his long thighs. His broad - shouldered, narrow - waisted body was relaxed, and there was a calm about him, a steadiness that caused Barton slowly to lower the Winchester although he kept it ready in his hands.

CARSTAIRS, the Englishman, watched the Ranger. Though covered with dust, and scratched by the dagger thorns of the chaparral, Jim Hatfield emanated an aura of strength which awed men.

"That's better," drawled Hatfield, as the puzzled Barton frowned at him from the veranda. "Look close, and yuh'll see I ain't the man yuh thought I was."

Barton's eyes widened, as he took in the gear. At last he shook his handsome head unbelievingly.

"Who are you, then, and what d' you want?" he demanded.

"I've come to clear up yore trouble in these parts," declared the Ranger softly.

"By Jove, Barton," cried the lame man, "he's a different person, at that! Astounding!"

Phil Barton nodded, suspecting a trick, unable to comprehend what had occurred in its entirety.

"I wish you luck," he remarked dryly, and shrugged. "I'm afraid it'll take more than one man to do that, in Zapata."

"Yuh a friend of John Toll's?" asked Hatfield. "The Double Bar T lies thisaway, don't it?"

He saw the darkening of Barton's eyes, the flush creeping up the bronzed cheeks.

"Toll is no friend of mine," declared Barton. "He's a bully and a bad neighbor. He hates me because I grow trees and object to having his cows trample them down. Yes, the Double Bar T isn't far, to the west, a little south. I wish it were a lot farther."

"What yuh need here," the Ranger said carefully, "is to quit fightin' each other and get together on wipin' out the bandits who're botherin' yuh. I'm headin for Toll's now, Barton, but I'll be back again. And if yuh run across that double of mine, lemme know."

He nodded to the Englishman, Carstairs, and to young Barton, pivoted the beautiful gelding, and rode toward the watering trough near the main corral. From the porch the two men watched him as he watered the sorrel and drank himself, scooping up water in the fold of his big Stetson, without dismounting.

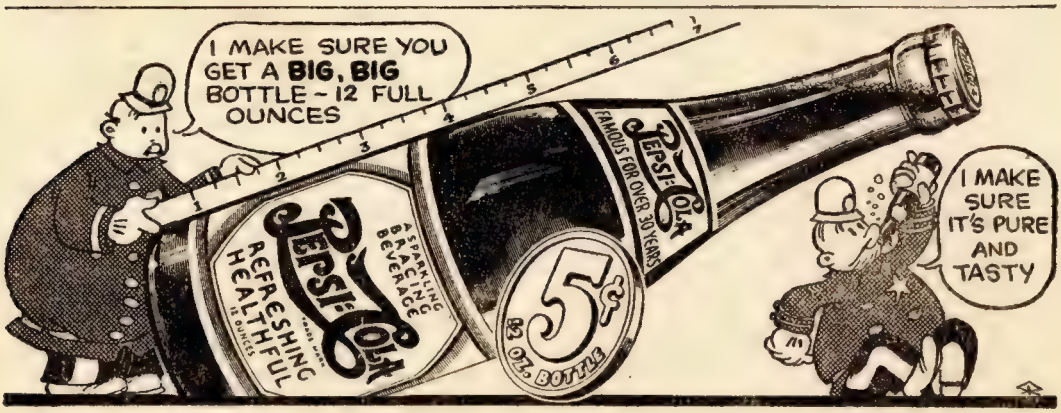
"Huh!" he muttered, as he galloped the sorrel west through winding cow trails. "They're shore on their ears in Zapata."

It was dark when Jim Hatfield sighted the lights of a large outfit he knew must be the Double Bar T. There was a great rambling adobe house of one story bunkhouse, corrals, stables, and a yard with live oaks planted in lines to the front door. As he swung up the wide dirt lane leading to the place, a mounted cowboy came spurring toward him.

"Hey, you! Who the hell are yuh?"

He shoved his horse up close, unable to see the face of the tall rider, shadowed by the wide Stetson brim.

[*Turn Page*]



"I'm here to see yore boss, John Toll," said Hatfield.

The waddy blocked his way, with his horse swung sideward. He drew out a match, struck it on his pants, and shaded the little flame with his calloused hand. The yellow beam full on the grim, long face of the Texas Ranger.

The cowboy let out a sharp ejaculation, jumping in his leather.

"Why, damn yuh—" he began, and let go the match, which burnt his mustang's hide and caused the animal to leap, as the rider dug for his iron.

But the puncher ceased his draw in the middle of it, seeing the steady blue-steel Colt which, like magic, appeared to nail him.

"I ain't shootin', and mean no harm," drawled Hatfield. "But I want to speak with Toll. Lead the way."

THE puncher froze, scowling. He would never betray his employer, would die first. The Ranger deliberately let the Colt slide back into its pliant oiled holster and the waddy, without further hesitation, jerked his rein and galloped his mustang to the house, with Hatfield at his heels. Drawing up in a sliding stop, the man bawled though the open door:

"Hey, Boss! That big Ranger jigger's here to see yuh! He says he ain't shootin'."

Having given his employer fair warning the waddy settled in his saddle and waited.

John Toll showed at the side of the lighted door. Through the portal the Ranger could see the inside of the big living room with its stone fireplace and the homey furnishings that showed a woman's touch. He glimpsed the woman, too — Dorothy Toll, slim and pretty and brunette — as she quickly rose with her father, an anxious look on her face.

"He's lightnin' with a gun, Boss," the cowpuncher reported gravely, as they saw Toll's hand resting on his pistol butt.

"What yuh want?" growled Toll, from the door.

The whole place was on the *qui vive*. Armed waddies hustled in bowlegged haste from bunkhouse and barns shoving to the front of the big *hacienda*. Some carried shotguns and rifles, others had their revolvers.

Hatfield calmly sat the sorrel, facing them, near the steps.

"That's him—that's the big Ranger jigger that's turned thief!" cried a puncher, pushing to the fore of the bunch.

Then another cowboy, with a bandage tied round his tousled head limped up, staring up at Hatfield.

"Yuh saved my hide, feller," he said. "I dunno why, but when yuh druv' Gomez' gang from them rocks, that was a real Ranger's play. I was in there and my bullets was gone. How can a man with yore nerve go bad, jest for money? Hard to believe."

Nobody shot at Hatfield, probably because of the play at the rocks when he had driven off a section of the rustlers and saved a few Double Bar T waddies. But they watched him narrowly, d e e p l y puzzled, bewildered. His troublesome double had committed so many crimes the whole county was gunning for the Ranger who had apparently turned criminal. However, the real Ranger's action on his first day in Zapata was more like the work of the famous officers of the great organization.

"What the hell yuh want, Ranger?" demanded Toll, again, stepping out onto the porch, arms akimbo so his hands were near his gun butts. "Yuh're the funniest actin' hombre I ever heard of. First yuh wing a couple of my men, try to get my money; then yuh save my riders from Gomez' gang. We folks in Zapata done figgered yuh'd turned sour and was collectin' bribe money for yoreself and now mebbe yuh've had a fight with Gomez and're aimin' to ask for more—"

John Toll exhibited the same bewilderment as had the other citizens of Zapata and the ranchers thereabouts. Before their very eyes a Texas Ranger had apparently thrown in his lot with thieves. Toll had once seen Jim Hatfield at a stockraisers union and the double had exhibited a Ranger star. The description of Jim Hatfield and the man simulating him fitted to a T, even to the golden horse.

"Yuh're all mixed up, Toll," Hatfield insisted soberly. "Yuh're talkin' of two diff'rent men—me and my double. There's a sidewinder ridin' these trails fixed up like me, and he's workin' with Gomez, not me."

JOHN TOLL shook his head, puzzled. He came closer, to stare into the big Ranger's rugged face.

"Yuh're shore like as two peas in a pod at quick glance," he growled. "If what yuh're sayin' is so. Why'd yuh come here?"

He still was not sure. He suspected some clever ruse in this visit.

"To tell yuh how to smash Gomez and the trouble yuh got in Zapata," Hatfield said. "Yuh need to get organized, Toll. Yuh're the biggest rancher in these parts. Collect a band of fightin' men and take care of the bandits."

"Easier said than done, Mister," Toll answered, shrugging. "Gomez hides out in Mexico, in the Sierra Madres. He hits a hunderd mile along the Rio. He ain't goin' to stay put while we hunt him."

"I'll fix that," promised Hatfield, and Toll looked again at him, into the level, strong eyes of the great fighting man.

"It's a good idea," Toll agreed. "We shore need to organize." But he was still chary of the tall man, waiting for some catch in it. He was not as sure about all this talk of a double.

"Yuh ought to be on good terms with Barton, yore neighbor, Toll," the Ranger said softly. "Yuh'll need him, too."

Toll's face turned beet-red.

"Why, that damned farmer!" he spat out fiercely. "He's one feller I'll never shake hands with, Ranger! He's in cahoots with Gomez, I believe. Half a dozen of my riders been shot—wounded or killed—on his land, and them Mex rustlers run off my cows across his range. All that stuff 'bout my animales harmin' his trees is lyin'. He's a dude and a snake!"

The hatred of the cowman for anything resembling a farmer vibrated in John Toll's voice. He thought, too, that he had put up with a lot from young Barton, a stranger from the East who had closed a section of the range to Toll's steers.

The tall man sat his golden sorrel close to the rail, half facing Toll, while the group of Double Bar T cowboys curiously watched, falling under the spell of the great Ranger.

John Toll stood with his booted feet spread wide, full in the light of the doorway. Behind him as she listened inside the main room of the ranchhouse, was his pretty daughter, Dorothy.

"I reckon yuh've bin fooled—fooled by Gomez and whoever's behind him, Toll," Hatfield said carefully. "Yuh're spendin' yore time and bullets fightin' against Barton, 'stead of against yore real enemies. Yuh better go talk it over with Barton, and see what he has to say. Get yore friends lined up, and in the meantime I'll be huntin' out the outlaws we're after."

He spoke convincingly, with the magnetism he had for men, forcing them to hear and believe.

But his speech was suddenly cut off, as a bullet whirled within a foot of the mounted Ranger, who was in the shadows. It ripped a great splinter from the porch floor at Toll's boot. The rifle missile, Hatfield saw from the flash in the night, came from mesquite to the east.

He touched the golden sorrel with a spur, and Goldy wheeled on a dime, spurting along the line of the veranda. As his Colt flew out and to firing position, the rifleman in the mesquite fired a second one that took John Toll in the body. Hatfield heard Dorothy scream, heard the startled curse of Toll as the lean, weather-beaten rancher staggered and folded up on the boards, his blood forming a pool round his body.

"That's from Farmer Barton, Toll!" a triumphant voice roared from the bush.

CHAPTER VIII

Night Fight

"TRAP! Trap!" screeched an excited Double Bar T waddy. "He set the boss where they could kill him! Get that big jigger!"

A third shot from the rifleman in the mesquite drilled through the head of a cowpuncher, as the waddies hurriedly broke up, swinging their guns and starting from the light circle. A couple leaped to the porch to pick up John Toll and carry him inside the house.

And Jim Hatfield began shooting into the bush from which the rifle flashes came.

Another gun spat from a spot several yards east, for an instant, lighting the black-shadowed chaparral. One of the men carrying John Toll was struck, and nearly fell. Then they were inside.

Hatfield, low over the pounding sorrel, driving full-tilt for the drygulchers, heard the whirl of the bullets that came at him. He shot to throw his unseen foes off aim.

The shriek of a long bullet past his ear meant a miss. But from the rear excited Double Bar T punchers opened up with a heavy volley. A slug bit a chunk out of Hatfield's Stetson, another cut a groove in the flesh of his arm, and the sorrel leaped high into the air. Goldy's stride was broken for a minute as a burning lead plum nicked his sleek hide. Others bit up dust or sang in the air.

Hatfield jerked his right rein hard. The sorrel responded, and hit the wall of mesquite with his side ribs, crashing through, the sound plopping as sharp as a gunshot.

Almost on top of the drygulcher, Jim Hatfield glimpsed a dark figure scuttling off, reaching for a saddled horse standing by. He flipped his right Colt, fired pointblank, to stop the turning rifle that threatened to pin him. His slug struck bone, he heard the crack, then the shrieking curses of the man he had hit.

The fighting sorrel, ears back, teeth bared in a snarl, leaped at the man on foot. The forehoofs struck the fellow's chest, knocked him under the driving hoofs. Beyond was a second figure, bringing up a gun that missed the first time, only grooving the Ranger's saddle.

"There he goes!" "There's the big jigger!" "Get him!" That was the Double Bar T yelling.

The other drygulcher did not stay to fight. Diving headfirst into the thick bush he scuttled away on his belly. Hatfield sent two shots after him, and turned to look back at the open area about the house. Off to the east was a tall horseman on a sorrel much the color of Goldy, though not such a fine animal. He wore clothes like those Hatfield himself wore, and in the semi-light could easily have been taken for the same person.

He was too far off for a sure shot, and Jim Hatfield started to work around. He was looking at his double now, the man who had brought such discredit upon the great Texas Rangers! The man who was undoubtedly connected with the disappearance of Hatfield's friend, Ranger Lew Thorn.

As Hatfield watched the big fellow whooped it up and fired back into the bunched ranks of the Double Bar T men. He hit a couple of them before he turned and spurred full-tilt for the chaparral, even as Hatfield drove the golden sorrel on his trail.

The infuriated cowboys, grabbing horses, not waiting to saddle but riding bareback, guns blazing in hand, came tearing in pursuit. They glimpsed Jim Hatfield as he rode the twisting lanes of the mesquite growth.

"That's him—he kilt the boss!"

Guns blasted at him, guns in the hands of men who should have been friendly.

"Doggone, I shore got to take that sidewinder!" Hatfield muttered, as he was forced to swing south away from the direct line of pursuit. "That feller undoes what I do faster'n I can do it!"

THERE was a grim humor to it that did not entirely escape him. But it was a humor that had a life-and-death significance. Maddened as they were, the waddies would shoot him dead at sight. Never would they allow him to get close enough to speak to them again.

"Only one thing to do," he decided, "and that's to nail the hide of that double of mine to the fence where everybody can see it!"

He cut south, the sorrel outrunning the Double Bar T mustangs. A half moon was rising, silvering the sky. The

shadows of the thorned bushes, mesquite, creosote, bayonet, the wierd forms of giant cacti were inky on the grassy ground.

Grama brushed belly deep against the handsome sorrel as the expert horseman guided Goldy along the twisting lanes in the chaparral. Here and there a cow or a small bunch of the animals stirred up at the approach of the Ranger, hoofs pounding the dirt. Dust flew up, clogging the nostrils.

To the north, behind him, he could hear the yells and wild shooting of the Double Bar T.

Then, up on a mesquite ridge, the country opened over a wide field of high grama grass, dark-tipped in the night. A little breeze waved the graceful wands of the grass which the cattle loved. Cutting down toward the Rio Grande, some miles south, rode the man Hatfield hoped to come up with—his double. He recognized the rider against the moonlit sky as the tall fellow turned his face, twisted with tense alarm, back over his shoulder.

"Have to take him alive if I can," the Ranger muttered. "There's a lot of questions that feller can answer!"

Hatfield's lips tightened grimly for one of those questions concerned Lew Thorn's disappearance. Another was, who had egged on this man who looked so much like Hatfield, to simulate the Ranger with such diabolical success that every decent man's hand in Zapata was against the real Jim Hatfield.

He swung the sorrel so that he could reach a point close to the line of flight of the man on the yellow horse. Goldy was clever at running behind cover. They seized what cover they could find, until they reached the edge of the field across which the rider on the yellow horse was fleeing, until they were within a few hundred yards of the other rider.

Hatfield lightly touched the gelding with a spur, and Goldy raced toward the rider in the middle of the field.

It was then that Hatfield saw the men ahead, coming from the eastern chaparral. A small army of them, their faces masked blobs under peaked Stetsons trimmed with conchas and pearl buttons.

"Hey, Gomez!" panted the Ranger's double. "The whole Double Bar T's on my tail!"

The Mexican chieftain snapped an order to his men.

"Into the bush! Wait'll they're close, *compañeros!* Then shoot to kill!"

Gomez' glittering eyes swept the field. He saw the Ranger to the south. With a round Spanish curse, he threw up his gun to blaze away at the man on the sorrel.

Hatfield had pulled up, half turned for a clean shot. He raised his Colt, hoping to get the man who aped him. But the great crowd of *vaqueros* had closed around his target. He aimed at Gomez, and as his gun spat, he heard the outlaw chief shriek a curse of pain, and saw him claw at his ribs.

THEN he was heading back, for the great array of guns had concentrated on him. Riding pellmell for cover, he was aware of the singing bullets. As he hit the mesquite, zigzagging to throw off aim, twenty Double Bar T riders swept up and charged across the meadow.

"Look out, boys, there's a hull passel of 'em there!" bawled the foreman.

That fusillade which had been sent at the Ranger had at least warned them of what they were riding into, thought Hatfield, as he filled his guns and prepared to help the ranchers. He was glad of that.

The ambush was foiled. The Mexicans were out in the open, and the Double Bar T warned. The punchers pulled up, whooping curses, shooting at the ranks of the bandits.

Gomez had only been pinked. He was on the job again, screaming orders to his men. The Mexican *bravos* lined out for a charge. There were four score of them at the least. The awful bangings of guns rent the air of the rangeland. Men cursed.

Several Double Bar T men took lead as the two forces came together. They scored hits on the enemy, but prudence prevailed, and after a quick exchange of shots in the open, the cowboys retired back to the chaparral and headed for cover.

"After 'em!" yelled Porfirio Gomez.

Jim Hatfield sat his sorrel, his shots accurate, as with his Colts he picked off outlaw after outlaw. They could not proceed with such an annoying fire from the flank. A dozen came at him, shooting a blazing hell of lead as they approached.

The Ranger turned, but he was never one to retreat without good reason. He kept up a running fight that did not peter out until he was far in the dense bush above the Rio Grande.

Sweating, torn by the thorns, the tall Ranger let the sorrel find a waterhole in the darkness. Both man and horse drank, and Hatfield washed himself free of dust, bandaged his scratches and bullet tears.

"Guess we need a few hours, shuteye, Goldy," he murmured. "Somebody's either all-fired smart or else lucky, comin' on my heels thataway to the Double Bar T. . . . I hope John Toll ain't dead."

He bedded down in the chaparral, with his saddle for a pillow. The milky sky was soft, through the torturous black arms of the mesquite on the ridge he picked. A little wind, blowing as from a distant oven, came from the southwest, rustling the dry brush. Cracklings sounded about the prostrate Ranger, the movements of animals hunting or being hunted in the mysterious wilderness night.

Here were steers, many of them hidden out from mankind for years, and wild as jungle beasts, with long horns that could impale a horse; wild javelinas, truculent boars with sharp tusks; tiny deer, and rattlesnakes, beady-eyed, coiled, and watching for prey. And, worse than the creatures Nature had placed in the chaparral, somewhere to the north lurked the huge murderous band of Porfirio Gomez and his vicious allies. . . .

With the first gray hint of dawn the Ranger woke, instantly alert. The sun was not yet up and the air had cooled a bit during the night. Birds trilled a welcome to the new day, flitting from branch to branch. Wild creatures that hunted in the night were going into dens and coverts to sleep through the hours of light.

THE Ranger squatted by his saddle, munching a hardtack biscuit, biting off a chunk of dried beef to chew. He had water, and tobacco, and he enjoyed the solitude of the great wilderness. A soft whinny and the stamp of hoofs told him Goldy had heard him and was moving toward him. The great golden sorrel came through the lanes and nuzzled his master's hand. Hatfield handed him a piece of biscuit, a treat for the gelding.

"Guess we've seen enough to start on, Goldy," the officer remarked aloud. "It's plain to me somebody's tryin' to keep up a feud 'twixt Phil Barton and Toll. And—we got to have the hide of that big jigger who's pretendin' to be me."

The golden horse sniffed. The sound had a different timbre and the tall man got up quickly, looking toward the northwest.

"Yuh're right, Goldy," he agreed. "Riders up there."

From the mesquite ridge, with the thorny trees covered with white, aromatic blossoms he could see across the land, and glimpsed a horseman rapidly riding east. His keen eyes also picked out the course of another rider, farther north, by the movements of crows that winged from the invisible man's path as he passed through the chaparral.

Saddling up, he let the sorrel pick a way down the sliding sand of the ridge, and his route cut across the trail which the nearer horseman was following. At a distance, the Ranger saw the cowboy ride past, intent on his business. He rode a Double Bar T mustang, wore waddy clothing.

"Messenger," decided the Ranger.

After the man had passed that field he swung in on his trail and headed east. The clogging dust picked up by the hoofs of the horse ahead caused him to pull up his bandanna to sift some of the choking stuff from the air he breathed.

"Figger Dan Young can show me jest where Gomez' Mexican camp stands," he mused after awhile.

The trail opened out, and he saw steers grazing on tufts of grama; then a weather-beaten ranchhouse. A man with a pail moved near the barn, water-

ing stock. When he caught sight of the tall rider on the golden horse he dropped his pail, jerked out a Frontier Model .45 Colt pistol, and began shooting, dropping to one knee at the corner of the barn. As his bullets whistled around the Ranger, Hatfield shrugged, and turned the sorrel in a wide circle to avoid the place.

When he sighted a second ranch, three cowboys whooped and fired on him. They grabbed horses, started to chase him, but the spurt of the golden sorrel discouraged them and their bullets fell short.

To Jim Hatfield it was beginning to look as if he had never headed into any country where he was quite so unwelcome.

CHAPTER IX

Warning

IT was still early in the day when the Ranger saw Zapata town below, and worked through the chaparral to the east side where stood Dan Young's small home. Citizens were up and storekeepers were taking down their shutters. But many townspeople slept later than ranchers and the tall Ranger came up behind Young's stable and slipped inside it without being seen, leaving Goldy back in the mesquite.

Right across Tin Can Alley was Young's cabin, squeezed between a saloon and a gambling hall. According to his usual custom, the Ranger found a crack in the wall and carefully looked over the surroundings before he stepped out. For every man's hand was against him, thanks to the killer who was posing as a Ranger.

Tin Can Alley was deserted. At the rear of the gambling house was a half-open window. Hatfield's gray-green eye rested on it for a moment. He was about to unlatch the alley door and step across when he caught a slight movement from the darker interior of the room where the window gaped.

He looked again but the room appeared deserted. Yet his instinct was tuned to the sharpness of a hunting tiger's.

"Perfect place to spot Young's back door from," he mused. "Now I wonder! After all, they come huntin' me here that night—"

A horse, one of Young's, in a nearby stall, stamped and whinnied, disturbed by the tall man up front. Hatfield watched the window. Again, after the sounds made by the horse, he was sure he glimpsed a Stetson top in the dimness of the interior.

He found a pebble in the dirt floor of the stable, and a crack between the up-and-down boards large enough for it to pass through. Quickly he flicked the little stone at the back window of Young's cabin. It hit the glass with a tinkling sound. A second one brought the small, wizened marshal to his kitchen door.

"Young!" whispered the Ranger.

Dan Young's eyes blinked, but he heard the soft call, and crossed to the stable, whistling as though he were coming to tend his stock for the morning. He stepped into the barn.

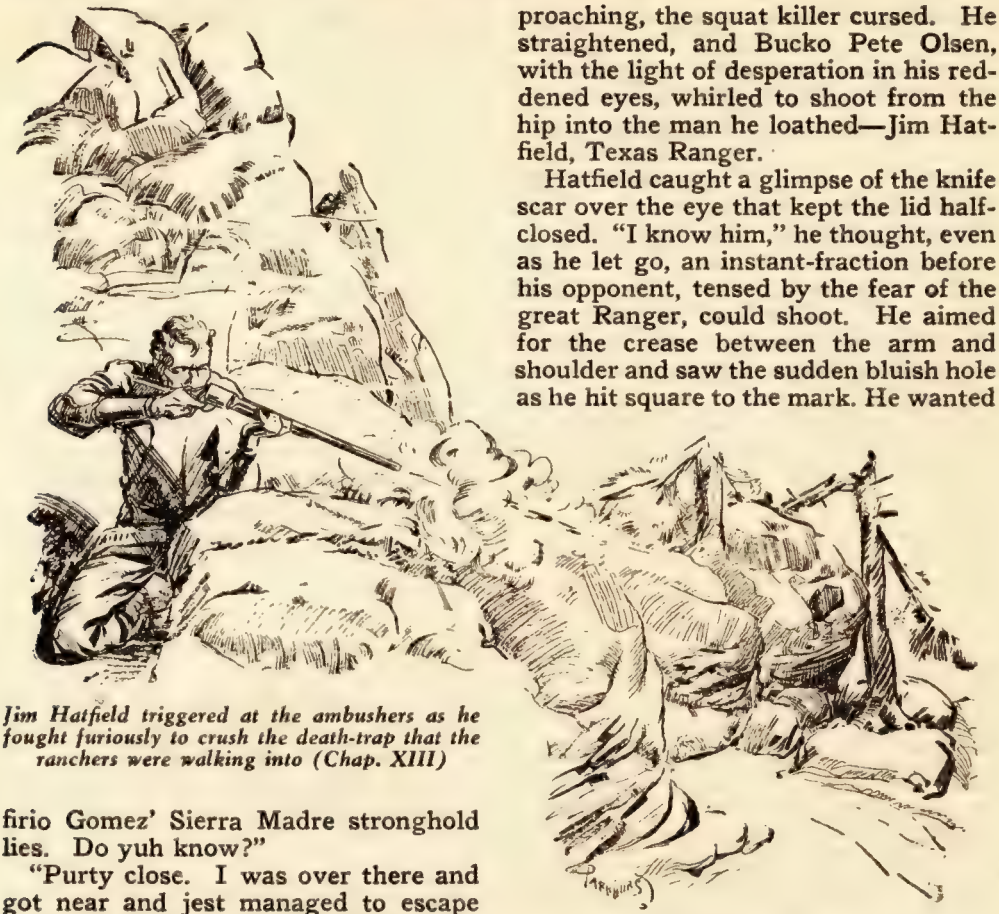
"It's Hatfield," the Ranger said quickly. "I reckon there's a man watchin' yore door—for me. I wanta take him, alive if I can. He's hid in that back room where the winder's open."

"I'll work round and flush him out," Young said promptly. "Now listen—I know damn well 'twasn't you shot John Toll. But they won't give yuh a chance to explain, savvy? Toll's waddies're spreadin' through the county, callin' on every fightin' man to collect at the Double Bar T to smash these bandits. Vern Briggs—he's the town marshal here—done sent me word, few minutes ago. I deputy for him now and then."

"Was Toll killed?" the Ranger asked anxiously.

"Nope. He got a nasty wound but it was in the flesh and they say it jest shocked him and made him plumb mad. They did finish a couple of his waddies, though, last night."

"I was there," Hatfield informed Young, "and seen my double. Guess Toll's took my advice 'bout formin' a protective band in Zapata. Now listen! I want to know jest where Por-



Jim Hatfield triggered at the ambushers as he fought furiously to crush the death-trap that the ranchers were walking into (Chap. XIII)

firio Gomez' Sierra Madre stronghold lies. Do yuh know?"

"Purty close. I was over there and got near and jest managed to escape with my hide on me. I'll take yuh there."

"All right. Thanks, Mr. Young. Now grab that pail and go back into the house like yuh was after water for yore stock. Then see can yuh flush that spy hombre outa there."

THE Ranger waited, a blue-steel six-shooter ready in hand, eye glued on that window. Dan Young crossed the alley and entered his own house. He went through to the front, and after a minute Hatfield heard a sudden yell from the gambling hall. A short, squat man whose dirty sandy hair was visible under his hat, dived out the window. In one hand he gripped a revolver and, before Hatfield could take a good look at his face, the gunman turned, pistol stabbing at the window.

The Ranger jumped outside. "Drop it!" he called. "Or I'll drill yuh."

As the tall man spoke, rapidly approaching, the squat killer cursed. He straightened, and Bucko Pete Olsen, with the light of desperation in his reddened eyes, whirled to shoot from the hip into the man he loathed—Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger.

Hatfield caught a glimpse of the knife scar over the eye that kept the lid half-closed. "I know him," he thought, even as he let go, an instant-fraction before his opponent, tensed by the fear of the great Ranger, could shoot. He aimed for the crease between the arm and shoulder and saw the sudden bluish hole as he hit square to the mark. He wanted this man, wanted to question him.

Bucko Pete's revolver, a fancy gilt-trimmed affair, spat at Hatfield, but the slug burrowed into the packed dirt between the tall man's spread boots, spurting up bits of mud. Yet, like joined explosions, came a third one, and Bucko Pete arched back, his head and arms flapping. He crashed in a sprawled heap outside the window.

Marshal Dan Young jumped to the window opening, a smoking Colt in his small, blue-veined hand. Hatfield bent over the dead man.

"Yuh got him through the heart, Marshal," he said softly.

"I couldn't take no chance, Jim," Young told him grimly. "I couldn't see yuh and didn't know whether yuh'd get him or not. I had to let him have it when he threw up his gun."

The Ranger quickly knelt by the corpse. Stirrings of memory came to

him as he stared at the ugly face of the squat man. He recalled that strange eye, and then to him came the mind-picture of a hot night in old Laredo, westward along the Rio Grande. Working on one of his dangerous missions, he had chanced into a large barroom just in time to seize a trio of gunmen who had shot a harmless citizen in cold blood.

"Let's see now—Bucko Pete, this one is," he muttered, seizing what his keen memory afforded, for he had only made the arrest, had seen the men he had taken into custody only a few minutes, and years had passed, with their drowning memories. "Yeah, there were three of 'em," he mused. "Wonder if that Crazy Jake's around, too. And Moore—no, 'twas Morse."

Bucko Pete was quite dead, and of no use save as an inanimate clue to the officer.

"Yuh know this devil that tried to kill yuh?" growled old Dan Young, his nostrils working as he blew smoke from his ancient Colt and slid it back into its holster.

"Yeah, seen him afore, when I sent him to State prison. Do me a favor, Marshal—wire the warden there and find out 'bout when this Bucko Pete escaped and how many went with him. Also, ask him 'bout a man lookin' like me. Yuh can wire my description and it'll do."

"I will, Jim. . . . Watch it! Them shots stirred up the town."

A stout man, his belly bulging out his cartridge belt, came hurrying between the gambling house and Dan Young's. He had his revolver in hand, and was frowning as he hustled up, to stare down at the corpse.

"Howdy, Dan—" he began, and looked full at Jim Hatfield then, and his eyes popped. "Hey—I want you! Yuh're under arrest. Did yuh kill this man?"

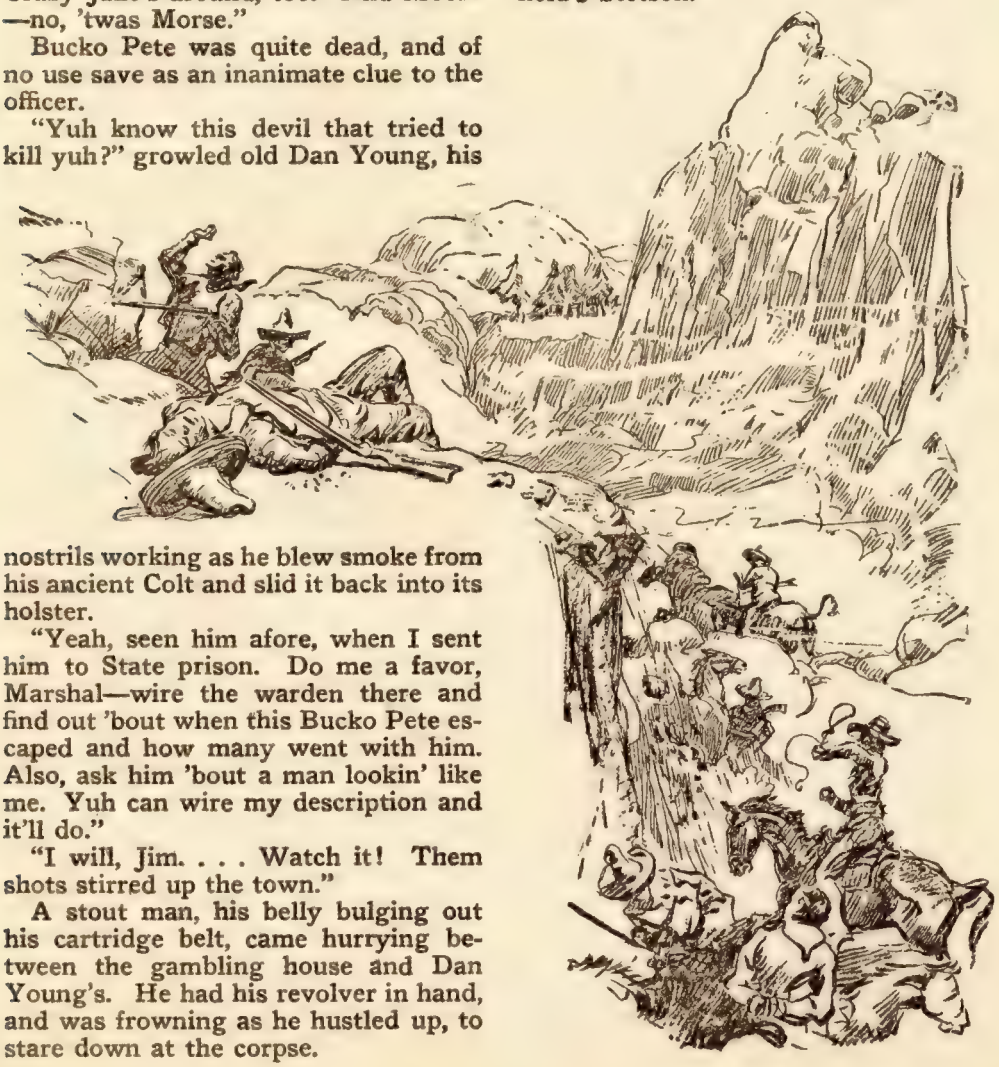
"Put yore gun down, Briggs," ordered Dan Young. "Yuh got this feller wrong."

The badge on Briggs' flapping vest read: "TOWN MARSHAL."

As the constable stared at the big man, awed by the fighting look of Jim Hatfield, excited citizens began charging down the alley. Their anger flared as they noticed Hatfield.

"There he is!" "It's that Ranger jigger!" "Grab him!"

A bullet whirled angrily over Hatfield's Stetson.



PHIL BARTON'S heart leaped, for he recognized the rider on the white horse long before he could make out the features.

"Dorothy," he murmured, and turned to meet the slim young girl as she spurred her horse at reckless speed through the lanes of his orchard.

His jaw still ached where John Toll had hit him, but he had been increasingly glad that he had not pursued the fight with his rancher neighbor. He kept thinking of Dorothy, her sympathy and sweetness. She was, he felt, a child of this wonderful country, a fine, free spirit; beautiful, but with a simplicity that attracted him.

He had placed guards near the shaddock trees during the night, and armed men were alert about the white *hacienda*.

Near at hand some of his Mexican workers, field hands he could hire at a reasonable wage, were at their tasks, letting water through the gates of the irrigation ditches, giving the trees their vital fluid.

He met the girl near the top of a hill, smiled and called a welcome to her, but though she answered him she did not smile in return. She was troubled, and greatly excited.

"Mr. Barton—I've come to warn you!" she panted. "Father doesn't know I'm here and he'd never forgive me if he finds out."

"What's wrong?" he asked gently. He held her hand, which she had offered him. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes dropped.

"Ranchers are coming in to our place—cowmen all of them," Dorothy told him quickly. "Father sent for them. Their purpose was to form a protective association against Gomez and his band of raiders. But last night Father was shot. Luckily it's not serious, and he can limp around this morning, though he's really in great pain."

"Who shot him?" asked Barton, a troubled line appearing in his handsome forehead.

"I'm not sure. I think it was a big man who rides a yellow horse. They say he's a Texas Ranger who's thrown in with Gomez. But—when father was shot, somebody yelled: 'That's from Farmer Barton, Toll'!"

Young Barton's face reddened. "You—you don't believe I had anything to do with it do you?" he cried. "No, of course you don't." He gripped her small hand.

"I don't. But everybody else does, Mr. Barton."

"Phil," he ordered, looking into her eyes.

"All right—Phil. I'm afraid they'll hurt you. Father and all his friends hate anyone who turns up the soil, you know. They call them farmers and they know that farming means the end of the open range, of stock-raising. Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything," he answered gently.

"Then go away now, and stay for a time, until all this blows over!"

Phil Barton's face turned grave. "Is it as serious as all that?"

"Yes, it is. I'm being a traitor to my father to tell you his plans, but I can't let them harm you! The ranchers are so excited they can't think straight, and when these Texans are feeling so they strike quick and hard. I believe the first thing they'll do is to attack you, drive you out. They'll manhandle you and if you fight them they'll lynch or shoot you."

ANGER burned in Barton's heart, anger against the cowmen who, he considered, were persecuting him.

"You'll go, won't you?" the girl asked anxiously.

He shook his head. "I can't, Dorothy. I can't run. This is my home and I'm going to stay in it. If I leave they'll destroy my orchards. Besides, I can't desert my men and act the coward."

Tears sprang into the girl's soft eyes. Barton was touched by her earnestness, the obvious solicitude she showed for him.

"I wish I could make you understand how dangerous it is," she insisted. "I've actually heard men saying just what they meant to do to you—tar and feather you, ride you on a rail, and worse. They think you've let Gomez use your land as a base to strike at the rest of Zapata County. Murdered cow-

boys have been found on your range, and—"

"I wish I knew what it's all about," Barton said unhappily. "All I've wanted to do is to raise my trees and mind my own business. But someone has been constantly annoying me. Many of my shaddocks have been injured and destroyed, my men fired on."

For a moment all the two could do was stare at each other. But in those glances was dawning something—something of which both were aware—that had nothing to do with farmers, or ranches, or any ordinary things. For an instant it held them both spellbound.

CHAPTER X

A Dealer in Horseflesh

UNAWARE of the terrible undercurrent of evil, which a cruel Fate had allowed to surge up to engulf him in black mystery, Phil Barton dismounted.

He reached up his arms to help Dorothy from her saddle, the thought speeding through his mind that he had never seen a girl so beautiful. When he set her on the ground, his strong arms easily holding her, a strand of dark hair brushed his cheek. That was the spark to the tinder that made emotions blaze into flame.

The next instant she was in his arms, his lips were on hers in a long fervent kiss. Everything else was forgotten—all the trouble which beset him. The world was a happy, rosy place in which to be.

"I love you, Dorothy," he murmured tensely.

"And I love you, Phil," she whispered simply, naturally, though her voice trembled with emotion. "Why, it seems as though we'd always known each other, doesn't it?" She smiled up into his face.

"It does," he said firmly. "Which is as it should be. Let's stop worrying about this feud business, dear. It will work out, I'm sure."

Coming on the warm, dry air a faint creaking sound interrupted the young lovers. They turned, and from the east saw a buckboard coming toward them, with a led horse behind.

"Who is that?" asked Dorothy. "I've seen him around here before."

"He's an Englishman, Colonel Charles Carstairs," Barton told her. "He's a dealer in fine Arabian strain riding horses. I ordered one from him—that must be the black he's leading."

"It's a beautiful animal," the girl said. "I can see that from here, Phil."

The black horse, led behind the buckboard the Britisher drove, had a sleek, shining ebony coat. The curve of its handsome neck and the slim legs showed its Arabian blood. As the wagon came along the dirt road toward the *hacienda*, the black curveted, jerking his head so that his silky long mane flowed in the breeze.

"Come and see him," Phil begged. "You love horses as much as I do—I know that, Dorothy."

But she shook her head. "No, I've stayed too long as it is. If Father finds I've been here—"

"We've got to tell him," he insisted, looking deep into her eyes.

Fear suddenly shone in those eyes of hers. "Please!" she begged. "Not yet, certainly. Not till all this trouble is straightened out. And dear—please be careful! If you won't go away, keep a guard set. If they decide to attack you I'll get word to you somehow, so you'll be prepared."

He held her hand, helped her mount. With a quick smile she galloped her white horse westward for home.

Barton remounted, when she was gone, and trotted back to his house. Colonel Carstairs limped out to meet him, smiling and bowing.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Barton. I've brought the Arab. Did you ever see such a horse, sir? Look him over for yourself."

Carstairs had a strong British accent but a cultured one. He was an interesting talker, as Phil Barton had discovered when the horse dealer had first visited him.

Barton loved animals, almost as he did plants. His eyes glinted now as he looked at the black horse. The

Arab was unbranded, two years old, and in perfect condition.

"How much do you want for him?" he asked the colonel.

"He'd be cheap at two hundred pounds—ah, I mean a thousand dollars, of course — but the owner will take hawf that," replied Carstairs. "He's a Spanish don, across the Rio. As is usually the case over there, I find, this gentleman's in need of the ready. I have the bill of sale with me."

"I'll take him, then."

It was a big price, but Barton wanted a breeder to improve his stock.

The lame man lurched ahead of him into the house. In Barton's study, Colonel Carstairs stuck a monocle in his right eye in order to read various papers necessary in such a deal.

"Stay for dinner and spend the night," invited Barton. "It's nice to have company out here. It's pretty lonely. I have some work to do now, but if you'll just make yourself at home while I'm out, I'll be with you shortly."

"Thanks, old man, I'd enjoy it," the colonel said. "I'm really worn out—my leg, y' know."

Barton went outside and called his foreman, the dour, tobacco-chewing Scotchman.

"MacVale," he ordered, "keep a sharper watch than ever, especially at night. I've been warned that the cowmen may attack us. Hire more hands for a time. We can have them at work near the house so they'll be on the spot if needed."

"Yes sir," growled MacVale. "Should I keep a guard on them shaddocks, too?"

"Of course."

Through the day Barton supervised work in his citrus orchards, happier than he had ever been before, in spite of trouble, for before his mind's eyes was a vision of her; his thoughts were all for her.

In the afternoon Colonel Carstairs drove out in his buckboard to meet him, south of the *hacienda*. Because of his game leg, the slim Britisher was unable to ride a saddle horse. Carstairs was interested in the orchards, and asked intelligent questions about the trees. Phil Barton was an enthusiast and he needed little urging to tell how he had carved the cultivated areas out of chaparral jungle.

After supper Carstairs and Barton sat on the long veranda smoking, talking of the world. Carstairs had evidently traveled a great deal. Around ten, Barton excused himself. He was in the habit of retiring early, and was tired. Mexican servants would take good care of his guest, and Carstairs had already been assigned to a room across the hall from Barton's own chamber.

It did not take Barton long to get to sleep. The wine-like air of the Southwest, his constant physical exercise, kept him in perfect condition. But sometime later—he did not know how long—he woke with a strange start. A heavy sense of terror was on him, as though he had awakened from a nightmare. Through the wide window near his bed he saw the star-bathed sky, a gibbous moon shining low in the dome of the heavens.

Then from the hallway he heard a sharp cry.

"Barton! Barton!"

It was cut off short. Then came a thud.

Leaping to his feet, Barton grabbed his Colt revolver from the table by his bed, sprang over to the door and flung it open. Carstairs' door stood open, there was a candle burning on the table in the center of the sitting-room, an open book by the chair.

HE bounded across to the door and looked in. The Britisher's slim figure lay stretched, face down, on the woven, gay-colored Mexican matting. Gun held ready, Barton hurried in to where the colonel lay and quickly knelt by the body. He laid a hand on Carstairs' shoulder, and for a moment Barton thought him dead. A dark weal ran from the Britisher's temple to his black hair.

Close at hand, open with papers strewn about it, lay Carstairs' black wallet into which the colonel had put the five hundred dollars Barton had paid him for the Arabian breeder horse. The money was gone. Barton's eye

flickered to a green card that evidently had been spilled from the wallet. It had an official seal and was written on in Spanish. From where he knelt Barton could read:

REPUBLIC OF MEXICO
The bearer, Colonel Charles A. Carstairs, is in the employ of this Government as a trusted and confidential investigator.

It was signed and sealed by the President of Mexico and the chief of the Mexican Treasury.

"Secret Service," muttered Barton. "Now why—"

He had no time to finish his puzzled thought, for the stunning blow that caught him from behind—a terrible crack—tore a gash in his scalp and sent blinding lights across his eyes. He collapsed on his face, close to Colonel Carstairs.

Five minutes later Phil Barton, a limp bundle, unaware of anything, was thrown across a horse's saddle, while masked men, heavily armed, swarmed about him in the night. The single lighted window of Carstairs' room, in the *hacienda*, shone like a beacon as the main bunch prepared to mount.

"Morse!" a gruff voice called. "You there?"

"Yeah, Jake, here I am. Is he still unconscious?"

Crazy Jake Flenge reached out, his wide mouth grimacing as he dug his fingernails into Barton's cheek, pinched them together till the blood spurted.

"Mebbe I hit him too hard, Chief," he mumbled.

"Damn you if you did!" snarled Morse. "I need him."

He sprang to Barton, knocked Flenge aside and, with Porfirio Gomez watching as the Mexican bravo's eyes glittered above his mask, he quickly felt Barton's pulse.

"No—just knocked silly," he said.

"Ees ev'rytheeng right, Señor Morse?" asked Gomez.

"Yeah," snapped Morse. "But that damn Englishman would have got us if we hadn't got him first. You've got to give me credit for that."

"But why should the Mexican Secret Serveece weesh to fin' you, Señor Morse?" Gomez asked. "You do not tell me zat."

"Some day I will. First we've got to consolidate in Zapata, and we can't waste any time because Toll's collectin' a bunch of local cowmen against us. That doesn't worry me so much, though as this Hatfield devil being on the job. He must die! He and Marshal Young killed Bucko Pete in town, while Pete was laying for the Ranger."

"He kilt Pete?" Crazy Jake Flenge shrieked, forgetting where he was, and his voice ringing loud on the night air.

Morse slapped him in the face. "You loco fool, keep your voice down! D' you want that Scotch foreman to hear us?"

"Look out—someone comes," warned Gomez, and guns clicked.

MacVale, Barton's overseer, suddenly leaped at them from the shadows. In his hands he gripped a double-barreled shotgun, thrown up and cocked.

"What've ye done with Barton, ye murderin' devils!" he yelled. "This way, men!"

ANSWERING shouts came. Morse's eyes glowed with the deadly sheen of a rattler about to strike, and as MacVale pulled the triggers of his shotgun, the wadded lead tearing open the breast of a Mexican raider between Gomez and the Scot, Morse's pistol spat. His bullet took MacVale in the side of the head, over the ear. He was killed instantly, although to make sure Porfirio Gomez hit him twice with Colt slugs before the body bounced on the earth.

Brought by MacVale's warning shouts a knot of Barton's men, Texans and Mexicans, charged at the dark figures.

"This is from the Double Bar T!" shrieked Morse.

The killers fired a concentrated volley that stopped the attack and sent the defenders scurrying back for the cover of the *hacienda's* thick mud walls. The gang mounted and rode, about the place, whooping it up, shooting.

"Ees too strong to take, Senor Morse," called Gomez, above the roar.

The Mexican was like that. He and

his men would not charge a well defended position.

"C'mon!" Morse shouted. "We'll run Barton south for the time." To Flenge who galloped up beside him he said, in a tone the others could not hear: "We don't dare make a move about our buried money till we've got the country cleared, Jake. Too dangerous. With Pete dead that makes just you and me. We'll get rid of Hargan when we need to."

Crazy Jake's cat-color eyes glinted. His face worked, as he grinned.

"We'll get it and be kings of the country Chief. But how, 'bout Gomez? Supposin' he gets too inquisitive? He's one tough *caballero*."

Morse shrugged. "So were the Mexes who helped us before," he replied meaningly. "We only need time now and workmen we can handle. That's why we'll wait, till we're sure it's safe. And we will be, with the ranchers fightin' Barton. That damn Ranger who killed Pete won't get far now."

Crazy Jake sniffled. "Me'n Bucko Pete was like brothers, for years. Some day I'll catch that Ranger! I'll stick him fulla red-hot needles. I'll pinch his eyes out, damn him!"

"And some day I hope to give you the chance," Morse said tightly.

"Could we take him tonight?" suggested Flenge, his lips slobbering with vicious rage. "Yuh happen to know where he is?"

"He was in Zapata this mornin'," Morse answered.

"Let's go there and get him!" Flenge was in a mad fury. "He'll be shootin' me or you next, Morse. How can we put over yore plan in these parts with him hornin' in all the time?"

"We might try for him at that. Where's Big Dave Hargan?" Morse demanded, angrily.

"Been hitin' the *mescal* again," growled Crazy Jake. "He's down below, with the rest of the Mexes."

Morse called Gomez to him. "Pick up Hargan and head for town, Porfirio. You'll find that big Ranger at Dan Young's, the house between the Cowman's Bar and the Elite Gambling Hall. We'll give these fools a lesson they need. Smash things up!"

CHAPTER XI

Raid

RANGER JIM HATFIELD was instantly alert as he woke in the darkness of Marshal Dan Young's home.

Through Young's efforts and with the assistance of Town Marshal Vern Briggs, he had been hidden from the deluded citizens of Zapata who honed —not for the blood of the real Ranger, had they known it—but for the blood of Hatfield's double.

Briggs, a stout, florid man who was none too bright but who made up for that shortcoming with a sturdy courage which was admirable, had taken Dan Young's word for it, and aided the tall Ranger. They had turned the crowd aside. Later, Briggs had come to Young's to talk over plans with the Ranger and the old marshal.

Young had gone to the telegraph office and dispatched a wire which Hatfield had written to the warden of Texas State Prison.

The warden's answer had come at noon. It informed:

GEORGE MORSE, PETER OLSEN, ALIAS BUCKO PETE, JACOB FLENGE, ALIAS CRAZY JAKE, ESCAPED FROM THIS PRISON NOVEMBER 12TH KILLING GUARD FOURTH MAN YOU DESCRIBED IS DAVID HARGAN FORMER PRISONER ALSO HERE FOR MANSLAUGHTER HARGAN SEEN IN VICINITY OF PRISON AT TIME OF TRIO'S ESCAPE THOUGHT TO HAVE ASSISTED BE CAREFUL AS THEY ARE DANGEROUS KILLERS MORSE IS RINGLEADER AND VICIOUS CHARACTER FLENGE KNOWN AS TORTURER WIRE ME AT ONCE IF YOU ARREST IN ZAPATA AND WILL SEND GUARDS TO RETURN HERE.

"It's plain they met this Hargan in the prison," Hatfield said to the two marshals,when they had read the warden's reply. "I reckon this Morse and his pards had it in for me 'cause I arrested 'em in Laredo—that that was five years back and of course I'd forgot about 'em. For some reason—mebbe because their friends of this Gomez snake—they headed for this neck of the woods. After takin' Ranger Lew Thorn

—they've either killed him of got him pris'ner, though my guess is he's prob'ly dead—they fixed up this Hargan who looks like me, with Thorn's badge and equipment."

"Posin' as a Ranger'd give 'em a good chance to collect money from ranchers," growled Briggs.

"Yeah, and more. I guess they hoped I'd come down where they could take me. I remember now that this Morse sidewinder swore he'd get even with me if it took a hundred years."

"Then, asked Young shrewdly, "Yuh s'pose Morse is stirrin' up the trouble 'tween the cowmen and Phil Barton, to throw dust in people's eyes?"

"That's it," the Ranger said flatly. "Keeps folks from bandin' together right and goin' straight after the outlaws."

"I've heard tell of a lot of queer happenin's round this Barton's place," rumbled Marshal Briggs. "Barton's complained his trees've been dug around and kilt. And sev'ral bodies have been found on his range."

The two local officers watched the tall Ranger, whom they naturally accepted as a leader. In the short while Dan Young had known Jim Hatfield he had developed a tremendous admiration for the great lawman, so calm and cool, yet so lightning-quick and strong in action.

"THERE'S a lot that'll come out, onct we capture these devils," remarked Hatfield. "I'm wonderin' jest why Morse come back here to Zapata. A man like him would have a good reason. It might be jest that he knowed Gomez, but there's several things I've run on that don't altogether jibe with that."

"And what yuh mean to do next?" asked Young.

"First off, we'll have to hit what's plain—stop the murder and robbin' in Zapata, quick as possible," Hatfield said firmly. "I reckon the best way to start is for me to locate Gomez' home camp, mebbe grab the leaders off guard. There's a slim chance they might still be holdin' Lew Thorn prisoner for some reason of their own, but its entirely too slim to suit me. . . . You know where Gomez' camp is, Marshal Young, so—"

"Shore, I know," said the marshal. "It's in Mexico, though."

Hatfield nodded, seeing the question in Young's eyes. The state police had no jurisdiction across the Rio Grande.

"The *rurales* don't care if we chase bandits in their territory," the Ranger informed the old fellow. "Fact is, they like it, and'll give us a hand if we run on 'em."

"All right," agreed Young. "I'm with yuh, Jim. Yuh want me to get packs and mounts?"

"Yuh might do that. We'll start 'fore dawn in the mornin', and be across the Rio and in the Mexican bush without bein' spotted."

The Ranger was working under tremendous difficulties in Zapata. Though he had ridden to Zapata secretly, to look over the situation before announcing himself, the devilish work done by his double, Big Dave Hargan, made it impossible for him to aproach the people he had come to help. He was liable to be drygulched at any instant, not only by enemy guns but by the deluded ranchers he was fighting for.

His attempts to stiffen the cowmen against the outlaws had failed, thanks to the fiendish work of the keen-minded outlaw-leader who had seized hold on Zapata. Hatfield had faced a horde of enemies who had sought the vast empire of land wealth. He had ridden the wilds across the Pecos, with Death his constant saddlemate, and had trapped the vicious plotters against the State he loved.

In all such cases, however, he had been helped because during his early investigations he had been able to ride, for a time, incognito. Not only was that impossible now, but his very identity was an added danger.

Like the people of all border towns, the townsfolk of Zapata indulged in a long siesta during the middle of the day, when the town itself lay drowsing in the hot sun. Taking advantage of that, Marshal Young had made ready the slim packs and collected spare ammunition in the afternoon. His own rifle and pistols were cleaned and loaded, while in the barn Goldy and the marshal's mounts rested and had a

grain feed that would strengthen them. Hatfield had decided to take a fast spare animal along, also in case of need.

As dark fell the two, with their plans all made for an early start, retired. . . .

Just two hours before they were due to set out on their dangerous mission, spying out Porfirio Gomez' outlaw eyrie, the Ranger started awake. His blue-steel Colt was in hand as he slid from the bunk in his stocking feet. Marshal Young's snoring came to him; but it was some other sound which had startled him to instant consciousness.

A BOARD creaked, faintly, from the rear. He crouched by the wall, eyes staring toward the doorway leading into the kitchen. Soundlessly then the black figures of intruders, with dark blobs for faces—masked, of course—slipped into the sleeping room. Hatfield caught the burning glow of fierce eyes, the glinting of stray light beams on the steel gun-barrels.

"Is he here, that big jigger?" a man huskily whispered.

"Can't see, senor," a Mexican voice replied. "I strike a match, *si?*"

A match flared. By its beam the Ranger, with the end of the bunk hiding him as he crouched, saw them. *Vaqueros* with bandannas up to eyes under peaked, fancy sombreros — Gomez' riders. In the rear, looking over their heads, stood his double, Big Hargan. The Ranger's hand tightened on his gun.

Suddenly Young stirred, awoke.

"What the hell!" he cried. "Hey, Jim!"

"The big hombre ees not here," the Mex lieutenant growled, his voice muffled by the mask over his lips.

Half of them swung on Dan Young, their guns coming into firing position. The split fractions of a second spelled life or death, and Jim Hatfield raised his thumb from his Colt hammer. He had to shoot first, to save Young, and he had to pick the men in front who would have direct aim on the old marshal, his friend.

The *caballero* in the van close to the doorway, took the heavy bullet in the belly, doubling up with a shriek. The big slug tore on through, struck a second *vaquero* in the side, spun him half around. It glanced off a bone and nicked the arm of a third among the bunched killers. It was like stringing fish.

The match had burned out, and screams of fury rent the air of the small room. Old Dan Young had moved with the flash of Hatfield's Colt. He rolled off his bunk to the floor, his wizened hand gripping his Frontier Model Colt revolver as he went. Hatfield heard the thud of the old marshal's slight body on the boards—just a flash before marauder guns riddled the mattress where Young had been sleeping.

The Ranger's shot showed them where he was.

"That's him—get him," bawled Big Dave Hargan, jumping up and down behind the Mexicans.

Hatfield shot again, running his muzzle along the front line, where the murderers were able to take better aim. Marshal Young had his pistol going, cursing and shooting, and the bluish-yellow flares of the big guns lit the room with an eerie, intermittent glow, like lightning flashes in a pitch-black world. Twisted faces of fight-insane men, and the awful look that comes with death, showed in swift glimpses. The banging of the pistols made a deafening roar that caused the ears to ring madly, while punctuating this din came the screams and groans of wounded.

It was not until his second Colt was blasting them that Hatfield dared take an instant to aim for Big Dave Hargan. He was too expert a gunfighter to give the *vaqueros* in the fore the slightest chance. They were recoiling now before his fury, the fury of the Ranger's accurate, deadly guns that ripped the flesh with the cruel finality of a striking thunderbolt.

Rolling them back, Marshal Young fired steadily from the other side of the room. The outlaws felt the panic that such a fight brings to mercenary hearts. The killers stepped on the toes of men behind, trying to escape the bullets. They bumped one another, ruining aim.

Hatfield glimpsed Dave Hargan only by the flashes of the guns. He saw a slim chance, took it, but a peaked

sombrero loomed between as he took a potshot at the shape of the big man.

He heard screeches, the awful profanity of men struck by bullets. And when again he could see through the drifting, acrid powder-smoke, Big Dave Hargan was gone. The killers in the rear were running away. Those in front were dead—with Ranger lead in them.

The doorway cleared, and heavy, pounding footsteps of retreating men shook the little frame house. Confused yells sounded.

Hatfield rammed fresh cartridges into his hot Colts. Nostrils flared, he sniffed the smoke, and caught the dank odor of fresh blood.

The battle had lasted only seconds, but those instants had been fraught with action. The strain of such fighting in the dark had been terrific. But Hatfield's hand was steady; his brain was cool, muscles relaxed, as was so necessary for straight shooting.

"Jim—Jim, yuh all right?" called Dan Young.

"Yeah, jest a few scratches. How about you?"

"They grazed my hide, that's all, and I got a board splinter in the cheek. Come pull her out for me."

Hatfield glided over. An enemy bullet had struck the leg of Young's bunk, as he had crouched behind the end and had torn off a sharp chunk of wood which had flown into Young's face embedded in the muscles. The marshal took it like the fighter and man he was as with a quick jerk the Ranger removed the splinter.

In the confined space of the room, the banging guns had thundered and echoed like cannons. It was not until the ears of the men inside ceased ringing that they heard the yells and shooting outside.

Hatfield hustled to stare down at the dead piled in the back doorway. Then he jumped to the front, jerked back the door that led onto Main Street, overlooking the plaza.

Despite the hour, gamblers and late drinkers were still up, and saloons were open. Many homes were dark, however, for working men were abed.

But in the faint light that struck the plaza, Hatfield saw lines of masked devils riding hell-bent-for-leather up and down, shooting through windows, and at any citizens who dared show themselves.

"There comes Briggs," he growled, as Young came up at his elbow, gun in hand. He raised his voice to shout: "Go back, Marshal!" but the sound of his voice was drowned in the din of exploding weapons.

"They'll get him shore!" snarled Dan Young, as his gun came up on the instant.

Both of them shot at the riders who were sweeping pell-mell across the bare plaza. A horse crashed and a man flew off, head over heels.

Marshal Briggs had run out in his bare feet, hatless, with a shotgun in his hand. But he did not look fantastic—only courageous in the face of odds. For the fat officer had the dignity of his office and of a brave man who does not flinch from duty. He threw up the shotgun, and it roared its scattering pellets at the attackers, stinging them as they rode.

"There's the hombre I want!" cried Jim Hatfield.

UP the street he saw a tall figure bent over a yellow horse, spurring madly out from between the buildings, heading west across the plaza for the chaparral. Big Dave Hargan's course brought him close to the porch on which stood Marshal Briggs. As he saw Hargan coming the stout marshal bellowed an order to the big man to halt. Hargan, sweeping past him, poured a fusillade of Colt bullets into Briggs. The officer doubled up, crashing on the porch floor.

Racing out in the road, Hatfield fired after the fleeting Hargan, but the range was too far for pistol, and the big man was zigzagging the swift yellow mustang he rode. Other horsemen swept past, firing as they rode, cutting the Ranger off from the hombre he wanted.

"That's Porfirio Gomez, the rustler chief!" shouted Dan Young, pointing with his gun-barrel at the handsome *caballero* whirling by where they stood.

Both men fired at him but Gomez, hearing the close, deadly whine of bul-

lets, swerved. With a wild whoop he galloped after Big Dave Hargan.

The Ranger and Dan Young pinked two or three of the hard-riding *bravos.* Citizens were shooting from houses, and in moments might have downed the raiders. But the outlaws, having done plenty of damage with their bullets for one night, were satisfied. The echoes of their defiant shouts rang back to the town as they swung their horses and disappeared in the chaparral.

CHAPTER XII

Raider Trail

QUIET descended over Zapata, a quiet broken after a few seconds by the alarmed cries of women, excited callings of men. Windows had been smashed, several people had taken doses of lead.

A knot of citizens collected on Briggs' porch.

"I seen it all!" reported a Texan. "It was that big Ranger jigger on the yaller hoss that killed Briggs as he rode past!"

"C'mon, let's go over and talk to 'em, Jim," growled Marshal Young. "They jest seen that double of yores ride outa town. Mebbe they'll b'lieve yuh now."

Hatfield shook his head. "Guess I'll stay outa sight now, Marshal. They're excited and it'd take a lot of talk to convince 'em I ain't the hombre who jest plugged Briggs and rode outa town. Some might claim I jest circled round and have yuh fooled. I reckon the best play is for us to go through with our plan. I'd ruther do it quiet-like."

That was the Ranger's way. He had had one experience in trying to convince the bewildered men of Zapata that he was not the man who had been forcing bribe money from them. Next time he meant to make it open-and-shut. Besides, he was fairly certain that spies must be watching Zapata for Gomez, and he wanted to get started on his important mission to Mexico without any unncessary publicity.

"There's one way to show him," he mused, "and I mean to try it."

Yes, one way—and one way only, as far as he could see. That was to produce his double, dead or a captive. In such manner he could end all doubt in the county. And there were many men in Zapata who would never believe him until he did this.

"I'll see 'bout Briggs," Young agreed, seeing the wisdom of Hatfield's staying out of sight for the moment.

He rushed away as the Ranger swung back into the shadows. After a time Marshal Young hurred back into the kitchen of his own home, his face long.

"Briggs is dead," he said quietly. He was silent a moment—the one tribute to the man who had been his friend. But duty called, and he must obey.

"Soon as things quiet down we'll start," he said simply.

Half an hour later, in the opaque dark of just before the dawn, the two heavily armed officers, leading a spare mount, slipped out of Young's stable door and headed for the chaparral. They mounted in the bush and rounded town to the north. Finding the west road, they trotted their horses at a fast clip, with the stern-lipped Marshal Young in the lead.

"I reckon we'll take the next ford, below Barton's place," Young remarked, looking back over his slight shoulder at Hatfield. "That's the one Gomez uses most often, they say."

"Is there any other way into the Sierras?" asked the Ranger. "I mean besides the regular trail Gomez uses? Most likely he'll have spies watchin' the route he usually takes."

"I guess we can find the back way up, Hatfield," the old marshal said, after a moment's thought. "I've hunted outlaws in them mountains afore."

The freshness of dawn came on them a few miles west of Zapata town. Twittering birds flitted in the dense bush, greeting the new light.

The Ranger's eyes sought the dirt road they were following — the main one west up above the valley of the Rio Grande. It curved up and down from the mesquite ridges into cactus flats, and across grassy meadows that were uneven and marked with ruts where wagon wheels had passed.

MARSHAL YOUNG, like the Ranger, was expert at reading signs, and both recognized the fresh hoofmarks, hundreds of them that beat the dry brown dirt, as those made by the horses of Gomez' *bravos* as they had ridden hell-for-leather out of Zapata after their brutal raid. But they had already been assigned to a room passed some time before, and at a narrow cross trail had turned south.

"Mebbe they're headed home," suggested Young.

"We'll make shore of that."

Hatfield started along the narrow south path, but suddenly drew up. He turned, and after a cautioning glance at the old marshal, drew back into the thick bush near the road. Young followed suit, and they waited as the eastern sky reddened.

Presently, quite audibly, came the sound which the keen-sensed Ranger had caught on the faint breeze. It was the creaking of wagon wheels. Peering through the interstices of thorned chaparral the Ranger presently saw a buckboard and black horse driven by Carstairs, the lame Englishman.

"Reckon now's the time to check this hombre," he decided. "He snuk over from Mexico that night and I seen him at Barton's. I'd like to know his business in these parts."

As the team came close he took in the slim figure hunched over the seat, gripping the black reins. Colonel Carstairs' face was scratched and a bandage was wound about his head under his black straight hat.

As the horse came abreast of the Ranger, Hatfield touched Goldy with a knee and the sorrel jumped into the road. The Ranger grasped the black's bridle with his left hand, jerking down the startled beast's head. In his right, he held a blue-steel Colt ready, and Marshal Young, following Hatfield's lead, shoved out from the other side of the road.

The lame Englishman started as he saw the two riders who had so suddenly appeared.

"Keep yore hands on them reins," drawled Jim Hatfield.

"Oh, I say!" grasped Carstairs. "You did startle me, old chap!"

"This ain't a holdup," remarked Marshal Young. "We're officers of the law."

Hatfield had brought the team to a stop and Colonel Carstairs, aware of the guns, sat quite still.

"Delighted to hear you say that, sir," he cried, his heavy British accent the more noticeable because of his excitement. "Then I fancy I may report to you, rather than to Marshal Briggs of Zapata? That is where I was bound."

"Go to it, Colonel," ordered Hatfield. "What is it yuh got to report."

"Lawst evenin'," the colonel promptly told him, " I spent with Mr. Phillip Barton, the fruit-grower, whom you know, I fancy. As perhaps you may have noticed, I have a game leg that sometimes makes sleeping difficult. So I was reading, near midnight, when I caught a strange sound behind me. Turning, I saw a masked man, a person with a frightful look to him, wearing one of those tall hats the Mexicans fancy. This person struck me"—Carstairs gingerly fingered his bandaged head—"which is about all I recall until I recovered my senses. Then I heard gunshots and raucous shouting, and after a time Barton's servants returned to the *hacienda*."

MARSHAL YOUNG'S forehead was creased as he listended to the rapid-fire speech in those cultured accents. It was different talk from what he was used to and sometimes hard for him to understand. Sometimes Carstairs slurring was excitedly pronounced, though he was quite particular about his choice of words.

"Then what?" demanded Hatfield, as the colonel paused for breath.

"Why, I was informed that a criminal band had attacked," said the lame man. "They robbed me of several hundred dollars, and I fancy they took whatever was in sight about the house. MacVale, Barton's foreman, was killed, and they kidnaped Barton or else shot him, for we were unable to locate him about the place."

"Sounds like Gomez' work," growled Young.

Jim Hatfield went straight to the point.

"Thanks, Colonel," he said politely, "for yore report. We'll shore look into it. But the reason I stopped yuh jest now was to ask yuh about yoreself."

The Englishman stared stonily, his lean face cold.

"I don't understand, sir," he replied haughtily.

Hatfield signaled Marshal Young. "Go through him, Marshal," he ordered.

Young got down from his horse, stepped up beside the Englishman. He removed a gun from inside the black coat, and laid it on the seat behind him. Carstairs shrugged, but made no fight, though he said as his face reddened:

"You have no right to do this, gentlemen."

"Yuh'll have to excuse us, Colonel," Hatfield replied silkly, "but times ain't normal in Zapata. I'm interested in findin' out why yuh crossed the Rio Grande in the night the way yuh did."

Again Carstairs shrugged but said nothing. Marshal Young was examining the contents of the black leather wallet which he had found in an inside pocket of the man's coat. He drew forth an oblong green card and after reading it, silently passed it to Hatfield.

The tall Ranger eyes fixed on the card. "Mexican Secret Service," he mused. "So that's it."

"Here's somethin' else, Jim," growled Young, handing over a letter.

The letter read:

TO ALL POLICE OFFICERS OF WHATEVERCOUNTRY:THEBEARER, COLONEL CHARLES CARSTAIRS, IS IN THE CONFIDENTIAL SERVICE OF THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT. PLEASE GIVE HIM ALL POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE.

The signature was that of the chief of police of Mexico City.

"Here's some warrants and extradition papers," Young added. "Signed, but with the place for names left blank."

There was a short-barreled rifle in the Britisher's effects, and ammunition for pistol and rifle. He had spare clothing and various belongings marked with London labels.

"All right, Colonel," said Hatfield, as they replaced the man's things. "Sorry we stopped yuh."

"Glad to give yuh a hand," Young said. "Marshal Briggs is dead, shot down last night by Portfirio Gomez' gang. Reckon yuh can call on me, though, if yuh wish. I'm a deputy here. County sheriff's laid up with a gunshot wound."

"Many thanks," Carstairs said quietly. "At the present time I am on a confidential mission in Texas, gentlemen." He gave his expressive shrug. "Since you've examined my credentials there is no use in my denying what I really am. When I am in need of help, I'll call on you."

THE two lawmen drew their horses aside so the buckboard could pass. Colonel Cartsairs waved a hand and started the black. He disappeared around the next turn and the riders conferred for a moment, sitting their leather.

"Funny hombre," remarked Marshal Young. "I can't hardly make out some of that English talk, Jim. He's too lame to ride a mustang so he gets around in that buckboard. Wonder what he's after in these parts? Somethin' to do with the Mex government, I s'pose."

Hatfield nodded. "Reckon it musta been the Mex police helped him across the river that night," he mused thoughtfully. "But we better git on that trail. It's gettin' late."

The whole world was bathed in the golden light of the new sun, yellow as a great butterball as it rose in the brilliant blue of heaven. The aromatic smell of chaparral, the mesquite and creosote, ratama and pear, made breathing a delight.

Hatfield hit the south trial, watching beaten hoofmarks of the raiders. Two miles south he pulled up.

"They swung off from the river road, Marshal," he said, "and headed west."

"Huh! And some of 'em must have Phil Barton, if they ain't kilt him."

"Yeah, a few could've held him. They captured him 'fore they hit town. We'll have to find where they're aimin' for now."

He spurred into the lead, the magnificent sorrel driving in and out along the twisting narrow way.

To the north, through a leafy vista

now and then, they had glimpses of the rolling hills on which stood the citrus orchards of Phillip Barton. South lay the valley of the Rio Grande, the twisting silver ribbon of the Rio dividing Texas from the wilds of old Mexico.

"We're comin' to Double Bar T range," grunted Marshal Young, who seemed a dwarfed figure as he rode easily behind the tall officer. "There's a cut through them mesquite ridges, Jim. It's called Skeleton Pass. Smugglers use it."

Jim Hatfield stared ahead at the shimmering heat waves rising from the baked chaparral. Black specks that were almost invisible told him a whole story.

"Men up there, Marshal," he said.

Young's washed-out, blue eyes beneath their wrinkled lids sought the horizon.

"Yuh're right, Jim. Mebbe we'll run into them raiders quicker'n we expected. They must be close to Skeleton Pass."

They used their spurs, flying at a swift pace toward the spot. A mile further on, climbing a ridge, they caught the sound of derisive shouts. Then a gunshot crackled in the dry air.

"Now what're them sidewinders up to?" growled Young.

Coming to the top of the ridge, they paused to stare down at the scene before them.

"That's the Pass, there ahead," Young told the Ranger.

Red clay was visible where the cut ran through the sharp-backed hills.

"Hold it," ordered Hatfield. "See them men lyin' along the banks, on both sides of the Pass, Marshal?"

"Yeah, yuh're right! Waiting for somebody." Suddenly he shouted: "It's an ambush!"

CHAPTER XIII

Skeleton Pass

FORCING their way through Skeleton Pass now would mean running a gantlet of rifles that were only a few yards overhead. From their higher point, the two officers of the law could see beyond the western mouth of the narrow passage, and the danger that awaited them as plain to view.

"There's Gomez," Hatfield said softly. "Over to the west. And Phil Barton's standin' close to him!"

The slinky *bravo*, Porfirio Gomez, was facing westward, close to Phil Barton who was waving frantically at someone who apparently was approaching from the direction of the Double Bar T.

Who that was Hatfield and Young could not yet see.

"We better get in closer, Marshal," drawled Jim Hatfield, for suspicion was springing in his clever brain. "Looks like trouble."

He dismounted, his brain working swiftly to the emergency.

"Take that south butte, Marshal," he said quickly. "The one with the split rock on top. Yuh can look down on the Pass from there. I'll head around to the north. It's an ambush, all right, but we've seen it in time, so we better break it up."

He lead the sorrel rapidly across broken rocks, skirting slides and the heaviest cactus growths. When he reached the higher point he had picked out from which to command Skeleton Pass, he heard more shooting. Looking down, he saw that Gomez and half a dozen of his Mex raiders, shoving Barton ahead of them, were hurrying through the Pass.

"Now I savvy," he mused, as the van of ranchers, led by John Toll of the Double Bar T, pushed their mustangs toward the Pass. "Toll's got his protective riders started, and Gomez means to bust it up. Usin' Barton as a shield."

The sight of the fruit-grower would infuriate Toll, and as chief of the cowmen, the lean old rancher would be turned from his purpose of smashing Gomez, preparing to attack Barton. The sight of Phil Barton with Porfirio Gomez would only confirm the cowmen's suspicions that the fruit-grower had allowed the raiders to use his land as a base from which to attack the range—that Barton had been responsible for the deaths of men of the Double Bar T outfit.

Barton had been waving and yelling at Toll, from a distance. Hatfield figured the young man had been trying to warn them back from the deadly ambush. But Toll, of course, would think Barton was daring him to come on and fight.

Jim Hatfield had left Goldy back at the foot of the steep rock projection to which he had climbed. Lying along the slanting gray stone, hot from the blazing sun, he shifted his Winchester into firing position. Across the dip where the trail ran into Skeleton Pass, he caught the glint of sunlight on a gunbarrel, and knew that his friend Marshal Young was up in position on the butte.

John Toll swung in his leather, waving an arm to urge his followers on into Skeleton Pass, up under the guns of Gomez. The main body of killers were lying quiet, but their rifles were ready to burst into a chorus of death once the ranchers were caught in the trap. Toll had about seventy riders, hard-bitten cowboys and cowmen from surrounding ranches, fighting men all.

"If Gomez wipes them out," muttered Hatfield, "it'll mean the end of resistance in Zapata."

It would take a long time for the county to recover from such a horrible blow.

HE could see the lines of Mexicans and renegades who rode under the aegis of Porfirio Gomez. And he knew that Gomez who had risen from a petty rustler was now a major menace to the State of Texas and its pioneers, because he was urged by a cruel, keen-witted man who hated Ranger Jim Hatfield with a loathing that would not die until the buzzards claimed either the Ranger or his enemy, George Morse.

The spare belt of cartridges for the rifle, long, shining in their brass cases, lay close to Hatfield's arm as he settled for accurate shooting. Toll's van had hit the west mouth of Skeleton Pass, avidly hot on the trial of Gomez and Barton who had disappeared in the deep cut.

Shooting now and then, whooping it up in the excitement of the chase, the cowmen crowded into the Pass.

Hatfield took careful aim at the leather-clad body of a Mexican lying close to the head of the Pass. He could see the fancy sombrero, trimmed with silver conchas, pushed back on the man's dark head. He also observed the ready rifle held steady by the man's left hand, and the elbow crooked and resting on the ground, the right hand gripping the trigger.

Steadily the Ranger pressed his Winchester trigger. The rifle knicked back against his powerful shoulder. The Mexican raider down there, about to kill the first rancher, doubled back, a terrible screech ringing in the rocks. His rifle flew from his hands as Hatfield's long bullet, striking him in the spine, ploughed on through his vitals.

The effect of the big Ranger's shot was terrific. The scream of the man who had been hit, the clatter of the falling rifle on the rock, the surprise, shook the lurking raiders. A tremendous volley roared in Skeleton Pass. Excited by the Ranger's masterful strategy, the killers fired too soon.

Lead slugs spattered into the trail, and smashed futilely against the rock sides as the outlaws fired in insane, blind fury. A few bullets burrowed into the first of the approaching horses. Three went down, their riders hitting the dirt running, trying to maintain balance.

Only two of the ranchers were struck in that first awful crash of guns, however. A cowboy, one of Toll's followers, fell dead from his saddle, head drilled from side to side. Another got it in the shoulder, and his horse reared up, throwing him back as his legs relaxed from pain.

Jim Hatfield had sprung the trap ahead of time. Only a whisker or two had been lost by the unsuspecting quarry. That heavy blast of waiting rifles from the sides of Skeleton Pass proved warning enough to John Toll. With a shrill war-whoop, a cautioning cry, the lean owner of the Double Bar T jerked his swift mustang's reins and the animal dug in his hoofs, sliding to a stop. As Toll's men followed suit, the dust billowed up thick enough to slice in the west end of Skeleton Pass. For with startling abruptness the cowmen

had realized that they were riding into a death trap.

"Kill, *bravos,* kill!"

In the short lull following the echoes of that great volley, Porfirio Gomez sought to carry out the purpose of the ambush. Raiders leaped up, running for better position westward, losing no time in again shooting into the ranks of the massed ranchers.

HALF a dozen of Toll's men took lead as bullets sped into the bunch. The shock of the impact stopped all advance and up front panic took hold. Cursing, blinded men fought their insane mustangs, knocking and jamming each other. Had the main body been in side the Pass the casualties would have been terrific, for few could have escaped from the mêlée unhit.

As it was, the fusillade of whinning bullets bit flesh, and crunched bone. Horses in the van went down, trampled by their raging mates.

But the cowmen were not far enough inside the Pass for it to be a debacle. Hatfield's clever play had snapped the spring that would have set up the detonation of rout a few minutes too soon. Those ranchmen in the rear were able to break off to the sides and allow the van to turn and ride back out of danger — those able to ride. Several limp bodies, now and forever impervious to the pain that life brings, lay crumpled in the trail, and the tang of fresh blood mingled with the dust.

Colt revolvers began snarling up at the sombreros lining the ledges above the Pass. Gomez and his men were shooting into the dust clouds, seeking to accomplish their purpose of smashing the cowmen completely. Confusion reigned as the ranchers drew back out of the narrow way, and their lieutenants bellowing orders, sought to reform them behind the mesquite thickets. From the south butte Marshal Young fired steadily, pumping his rifle, lining bullets into raiders spines or heads or whatever offered a target.

Toll had skillful marksmen with him, men who had handled guns since childhood. A dozen of these were now shooting at the *bravos,* aiming at big rocks behind the ledges, so their bullets ricocheted into the bodies of the foe overhead. While in the first shocking panic the main body of the cowmen had fled, a number of cooler heads had found cover from which to put up a fight.

"There they go!" muttered Hatfield, as his Winchester drove a slug into a murderous killer below.

The raiders had, in fact, leaped up, along both lines. Unable to catch their victims as they had expected, they did not fancy a man-to-man scrap. Hatfield knocked over two more and they were acutely aware of his menace at their back.

A knot of them, masks drawn up to glittering eyes, guns up, swung and started to rush him. Pistols and rifles banged as they came on, and Hatfield ducked down until the first volley of slugs had whistled overhead, lead spanging into rock, whanging through the dirt.

Seizing the instant that usually follows a volley, Hatfield bobbed up over his stone breastwork, his gray-green eyes fixing the knot of raiders. Bullets whined as they whirled in the dusty, hot air. They cursed him as they attacked.

Cooly the Ranger shot the man in front through the head. An answering bullet ventilated his Stetson crown but did not spoil his aim as he smashed the shoulder of a second sombrero-crowned outlaw. Fifty yards from him the others quailed, seeing the deadliness of the marksman. The wounded *bravo* was squealing with anguish, gripping his shoulder.

Down below, the raiders were hurriedly mounting their horses which had been held ready by guards at the east end of the Pass. Hatfield, busy with the bunch which had tried to get him, had only a glimpse of Porfirio Gomez, now mounted, and of Phillip Barton, who was strapped on another horse driven ahead by the raiders. They dropped from sight in the thick bush, and the escaping *b r a v o s* streamed down from their positions, leaping on their mustangs to follow their chief.

A slug sent from a revolver in a last, parting volley bit a chunk from the flesh of the Ranger's cheek, spurt-

ing blood into his eyes. Hastily he wiped his vision clear, and got the hombre in the back as the killer turned in retreat. That was enough for the others. They ran, zigzagging, shooting hasty ones back as they went, and jumped over the shallow edge into the Pass as they headed for their horses.

Acrid powder smoke drifted with the dust. To the west, John Toll was rallying his fighters. Dismounted, guns in hand, they began working up around to the north, to come in from that direction on the raiders along the ledges.

Hatfield paused, shoving fresh shells into his hot rifle, his expert eyes taking in the retreat. Gomez and his devils were on their way to the Rio, save for a few who had swung aside to take care of Marshal Dan Young. Except for scattered shots, the firing had died off to nothing. Only close to Young's position were there any guns speaking.

"They're shore after him," grunted Hatfield, sliding back down the long rock slope on which he had been lying.

Six-guns were spitting flame across Skeleton Pass. The raiders who sought to avenge themselves on Young, who had helped Hatfield ruin their plan of battle, were in the south bush, shooting up at the old marshal. Hatfield could hear the different timbre of Young's rifle.

"Long as it keeps goin'," he thought, "he's all right."

He hit the golden sorrel's saddle without touching stirrup, and recklessly rode across the broken shale, Goldy slidding and sliping sideward half the time from the unsteady footing. They burst out across the trail, and Hatfield fired a blast from a blue-steel Colt after a couple of Gomez men who were late leaving the scene.

Back from where he had come he heard the yells of cowmen, disappointed that their opponents were gone. Toll had lost some men, but it was not a blow from which they could not recover. Thanks to Jim Hatfield, they were still able to muster a fighting crew against the Red Raiders of the Rio Grande.

Busy with his intention of assisting the badly pressed Young, Hatfield crashed on through the chaparral, the sorrel digging in his hoofs on the opposite slope. The revolver shots dominated though he still heard the rifle. But as he neared the spot where the hot fight still continued, the Winchester ceased talking.

"Now we have him, compadres!" a Mexican *bravo* shouted in triumph.

And it was at that instant that a tall man on a golden sorrel burst upon them, his two Colts smashing their defiant challenge.

CHAPTER XIV

Bandit Camp

So intent were the eight masked raiders on routing out the old marshal and killing him, that Jim Hatfield was but a few yards away before one happened to turn and see him coming.

Young was no longer shooting and the Ranger, with the cold fury of his fighting blood surging through his brain, his gray-green eyes the color of an Arctic sea, believed the old man must be dead, killed by raider guns.

His two Colts spat into the bunched raiders, up from cover since they believed Young was done for. They were about to cross the rocks that the old marshal had used as a nest, to finish him if life still remained in him. The onslaught of Hatfield forced them to turn. He had sent two outlaws sprawling to the ground by the time they were aware of his approach.

One fired a quick shot that cut the shirt over his left ribs, the bullet searing him. He felt it but it did not stop him. He shot at a sharp angle an instant-faction later, his own bullet leaving a blue hole where it pierced the forehead of a bandit between dark, glinting eyes.

"Eees the beeg gringo!" he heard a *bravo* gasp.

His Colt spoke with incredible speed. Bullets were raining at him, and he felt the bite of a second that nicked his arm. Goldy snorted, rearing as his hide was cut. The great sorrel bounded at the enemy figures, hoofs lashing out. A skull cracked hollowly, like a breaking

squash, then the heavy sorrel's shoulder knocked another man head over heels down the slope.

A shrill war-whoop sounded behind Hatfield, almost in the Ranger's ear. Jerking his head around he saw Marshal Young, rifle clubbed, strike down a masked devil who had played possum close to the high rocks, and who was seeking to put a slug through Hatfield's spine. The remaining raiders leaped away, diving into thickets in a wild effort to escape.

The quick, fierce scrap was over. Hatfield saw that as he rapidly reloaded his Colts. The Red Raiders, completely routed and in hasty retreat, were dropping south toward the Rio Grande.

"Yuh all right, Marshal?" panted Hatfield. His nostrils were flared, his body spattered with blood and dust. "Heard yuh quit shootin'. Didn't know—"

"Yeah, this danged old rifle jammed on me. I was tryin' to get it open when you come up, Jim. Was jest about to draw my Colt."

There was a trickle of blood running down from Young's wrinkled forehead, streaking his wizened cheek. It was from a scalp wound, and his big Stetson was torn from the path of the close slug. He had a second scrape in his old hide, but it had not been enough to stop him.

"Watch it!" grunted Hatfield, as a bullet hit the rocks, spattering them with lead and fragments of stone.

Whoops rang out across Skeleton Pass. The cowmen, coming along the upper rim, had seen the two below, had figured them as foes.

"Dang fools!" snarled Young, shaking his fist. "Cut it out, yuh crazy galoots!" he roared.

His answer was another slug for they had seen Jim Hatfield. They believed they had seen him with Gomez, when they had seen Dave Hargan. The shattered nerves of the cowmen had not yet recovered from the ambush so cleverly laid by Gomez and those men in the background who motivated the Mexican rustlers. The ranchers were excusably excited for many had taken lead, and half a dozen lay dead in Skeleton Pass. Having been so nearly caught, though, they were overly cautious now, expecting another trap, and so had allowed the bandits to escape.

"LET'S us get outa here, Marshal," suggested Jim Hatfield, as a bullets bit up a spurt of dirt a yard from his spurred boot. "I reckon them raiders 'll be in a hurry to cross the Rio and mebbe'll leave a clear trail for us to foller. They've took Phil Barton with 'em. Guess yuh seen that."

"I'll pick up my hosses," said the marshal.

The two officers drew off southwest, avoiding the whooping excited cowmen. A mile below Skeleton Pass they paused on a high point, and southward could see the ford across the Rio Grande. The land dropped to the river through the chaparral, with willow brakes and high bloodweed lining the shore. They observed a long line of figures, dwarfed by the distance—men swimming their horses for the Mexican shore.

"They'll head for their stronghold now," Hatfield deduced, "till things calm down some. But they'll be keepin' a sharp watch, in case the cowmen cross the Rio and chase 'em to their camp. We'll try that back way yuh was talkin' about."

"I reckon we can do that, Ranger."

"We better find us a diff'rent ford, too, Marshal. Them galoots 'll watch that main one."

Marshal Young knew of another crossing. It was dangerous because of quicksands on either side, and not often used. But the two made the crossing without mishap, the tawny water of the Rio Grande flying off in great drops as Goldy and the marshal's bony grey shook themselves on the Mexican shore. The spare horse, a rusty but chunky and powerful mare, was traveling light, and followed obediently.

The land was covered with chaparral jungle, dry, and teeming with snakes and wild creatures. Through the mounting heat they made their way south. Ahead of them lay the Sierra Madres of the East, timber-covered, bluish in the distance.

"If we come in from this side," Marshal Young croaked after awhile, for his

throat was dry with the dust of the deer trail they followed, "we oughta make it without 'em spottin' us, Hatfield."

The tall man nodded, his eyes fixed on the hills.

As they drew closer, beneath the brassy sun, the Sierra Madres took on a browner tinge, with spots of gray and black where rocks reared.

"That's Round Top," Young remarked, indicating a mountain whose summit was rounded off like a giant's sphere. "Gomez' camp lies up above."

"We're gettin' plumb near," Hatfield said. "Let's take our bearin's, Marshal, and camp till the sun's down. Otherwise they'll spot us."

A mile on they found a muddy waterhole. The liquid was alkaline, scarcely palatable, but it tasted good to the dusty, scratched men and animals.

They rested, chewed biscuits and hardtack, not wishing to light a fire which would betray their presence to the enemy. At the sudden onset of the velvet darkness, they saddled up and again rode, swinging up the northwest flank of Round Top.

The half moon was coming up, silvering the sky. The horses steadily labored up the mountain trail, picking a way.

"Ain't far now, Jim," warned Marshal Young in a low tone. "Better check our guns and be ready."

GOLDY, clever at this sort of work, was in the lead. The great sorrel continually sniffed at the slight breeze which came in their faces. It was around ten P. M. and they were well up on Round Top, when Goldy gave a snort and rippled his tawny mane.

"He's scented 'em," Hatfield said huskily to Young. "And they must be near. I better get down and have a look. Hold the hosses."

The tall Ranger faded off into the night, and crossed a broken rock stretch that took him to a gray cliff. Listening intently, he dimly heard the clink of glass, a distinct sound. Then suddenly the wind brought him a sharp cry—the piercing high tones of a man in agony.

The cliff blocked his way, running for as far as he could make out in the dimness, but it was only fifteen or twenty feet high. He was able to find footholds, clinging to the bushes that grew from its face. Edging up over the top, he could look down a rough, wooded slope and see the reddish glow of a camp below.

Inch by inch, down flat, the Ranger wormed through the pines. There were many men in that camp, that was set in a natural basin in the mountain top, with a fresh spring bubbling below. Rough brush and stone shelters showed it was a permanent nest for the bandits.

"Stop it—stop it, I tell you!"

That voice, quivering with pain, struck a familiar chord in Hatfield's brain.

"Phil Barton," he muttered. "They're torturin' him."

He was near enough now to distinguish the figures of the rustlers. Dark faces gleamed in the firelight. The odor of coffee, frying beef, and whiskey mingled with the burnt-wood aroma. Masks were down and he saw dark faces of *bravos,* with glinting whites of eyes. He saw the fierce, lean countenances of renegade Texans, too, who had gone over into Gomez' outlaw camp.

"There's Porfirio hisself," he mused. "What a target I could make of it."

But he held his fire. Gomez, the handsome bandit chieftain, lounged in the center of the camp, surrounded by his henchmen. Guns were stacked about, and all the outlaws wore their revolver belts. Sentries could be made out, farther down the mountain. Evidently the bandit crew considered that the cliff protected them from the other flank.

A circle of them, with Gomez dominating, sat or stood around someone whom Hatfield decided must be the prisoner, Phil Barton. He could not see Barton from where he crouched, but he glimpsed Crazy Jake Flenge. He could even see the torturer's shining teeth as the strange man grinned his clownish smile.

Working to the right, and a bit nearer, Hatfield finally could just make out Barton, prostrate on the stony earth near the fire. Barton's hands and ankles were tied by rawhide thongs. Crazy Jake squatted by him, now and

then reaching down to pinch the skin of his cheek or to prick him with the end of a knife that glittered in the firelight. The torture seemed to amuse the rustlers, and they laughed boisterously, with especial heartiness when Barton winced or objected.

But while Flenge annoyed Barton, he did not seriously injure him, contenting himself with minor tortures. At last the bandits grew tired of the sport and drew off to roll themselves in blankets to sleep.

For an hour the Ranger lay there observing the camp as it quieted down. Finally even Porfirio Gomez, with a wide yawn, betook himself to bed. The fire had died to red embers and the ruby glow lit only a small area about the stone-lined hearth where the rustlers did their cooking.

CRAZY JAKE still sat by Barton's head. Flenge was dozing, his strange clown face hidden by his folded arms.

There was a stir to the east, in the direction of the trail that led to the eyrie. A man on a yellow horse loomed into view as Hatfield turned his eyes that way—his double, Big Dave Hargan!

Hargan left the yellow horse below, but did not unsaddle. He came up the slippery path toward the main camp, and saw Crazy Jake asleep at the racked Barton's side.

With the noises of the camp stilled, Jim Hatfield could by straining his ears, catch the words that were spoken.

"Wake up!" growled Hargan, nudging Flenge with a boot toe.

Crazy Jake started, turned a grimacing face up at the tall man.

"Hello, Dave. The chief with yuh?"

"He's comin' up. Yuh've got Barton, huh? Morse says I was to tell yuh to keep him aside, where the Mexes won't hear. I'll help yuh tote him some place."

The two men lifted Barton who was sleeping from sheer exhaustion, and carried him to the edge of the clearing. They were nearer to Hatfield now, and he could hear what the two said as they squatted by Phil Barton and began to roll cigarettes.

"Yuh s'pose Barton'll be able to remember?" Hargan inquired.

"Hope so," Flenge replied. "I ain't asked him nothin' yet."

"Morse said to ask him what he done to the big old split oak and to that red boulder with the cross dug in it. Said to burn him in case he says he's forgot. Mebbe the sidewinder got it all hisself."

"Don't say that, damn yuh!" snarled Crazy Jake, his face working nervously. "Don't say it!"

Big Dave Hargan shrugged, and Hatfield saw that his face worked, too, with nervousness.

"All right, I won't," he growled. "Jest the same, Flenge, I've done a hell of a lot and all I got so far has been bullets shot at me. That damn Ranger come close to gunnin' me in Zapata and I don't like the way he's goin' after things, specially me."

"We'll kill him, pronto," promised Flenge. "Morse'll take care of that Ranger."

"I hope he does. I've told Morse I ain't ridin' the Texas range no more till Hatfield's dead. Why, he done beat a whole passel of us off at Marshal Young's! He's kilt Bucko Pete and I've got a slice outo my hip where he damn near finished me."

Crazy Jake snarled at the big fellow, who was obviously cracking up. The fighting power of Jim Hatfield, whom Big Dave had been aping, had tremendously impressed Hargan and shaken his nerve.

"Yes, sir," insisted Hargan, "I'm goin' to stick right here in camp where I'm safe, till Hatfield's buzzard bait!"

"Shut up!" ordered Flenge. "Here comes Morse now. If he hears yuh goin' yeller—"

Big Dave started, stared at the strange face of the torturer. Hatfield turned his eyes below. He could glimpse a dark figure, as a man dismounted from his horse and came up the slope. The fellow was bulky, perhaps partly because he was swathed in a black cape that hung loose about his tall body.

Flenge and Big Dave went down to meet him. They drew off to talk to him, and Hatfield had only a tantalizing

glimpse of the man he knew must be George Morse, instigator of the trouble in Zapata. He could not see Morse's face, either, for it was still covered by his bandanna, perhaps as protection against dust on the trail up, or perhaps from the feral wariness of the man.

Presently Crazy Jake Flenge hurried across the open space. He shook Porfirio Gomez awake and the lithe Mexican rustler chief, yawning, strolled over to the shadowed spot where Morse lurked. After a time Gomez came to the center of his camp, and called out sharp commands which brought his sleeping men sharply to their feet.

"*Compadres,*" he cried in Spanish, "we got to kill the gringos of John Toll! They hunt use and we will let them find us—at the very spot where Toll lives. *Si,* we go to take the Double Bar T! When the hunters return, they will find us there—waiting!"

It was a bold, brutal plan. Hatfield saw its strength immediately. The ranch would be guarded by only a few men, while Toll's cowmen hunted Gomez and his band across the wide spaces of the county. Once Gomez had control of the Double Bar T, he could lie in wait and shoot down the returning ranchers, who were making the spot their headquarters.

A cheer rang in the air. Men grabbed up their guns and saddles, and headed for the horses that were hobbled below.

CHAPTER XV

Flight

ONLY a few minutes, and the gang had started. The camp was nearly deserted, save for a half dozen *vaqueros* who were left behind to guard the place. Crazy Jake and Big Dave, who also remained in camp, quickly stepped over to Phil Barton.

Hatfield, who had seized his opportunity to get within twenty-five yards of Barton's trussed form, lay squeezed flat to the earth. He was not far off when Crazy Jake, with a knife in his hand, approached Barton in a business-like manner. He squatted by Barton's head.

"When yuh cleared that land south of yore house, Barton," Flenge demanded, "yuh cut down a three-hundred-year old split oak, didn't yuh?"

Barton did not immediately reply, half stunned as he was by what he had undergone. Jake jabbed the knife deep into his cheek. Barton cried out in anguish and Flenge grinned with pleasure at the brutal work.

"Quick, talk fast and don't lie," ordered Crazy Jake.

"I—I can't say," gasped Barton. "What oak—what hill? What are you talking about?"

Crazy Jake's knife was descending again but Hargan stopped his hand.

"Looka, Barton," he growled. "Save yoreself trouble and talk. Yuh cleared that land for yore orchards. There was a big split oak standin' on the east side of the hill southeast of yore house, and a red rock marked with a deep-cut cross twenty paces direct east of the oak. Can yuh say jest where them two stood?"

"Why, no. I had a hundred peons clearing land for me. How could I identify every rock and tree they dug out?"

Hargan cursed in terrible disappointment. He threw himself on Barton.

"Yuh lie!" he snarled. "Yuh found it and are keepin' it for yoreself!"

But as Barton only stayed silent, even when Crazy Jake twisted his fingers and cut them, Hargan quit.

Big Dave straightened up, and went to where the mysterious Morse awaited their report.

"Damn yore soul," gritted Crazy Jake Flenge to Barton. "Yuh're no good to us. I'm goin' to carve yuh to death—after I'm shore yuh're not lyin'."

With a panther leap he was on Barton, slashing the young man's face and body, growling like a beast.

Hatfield approached within a few feet of Flenge who was intent on his horrible task. Crazy Jake, his face contorted, his clown mouth awry, looked up into the big Ranger's set features.

"Drop that knife and throw up yore paws, Flenge!" Hatfield commanded.

Crazy Jake Flenge quivered, froze, his eyes widened to the roundness of saucers.

"Yuh—damn yuh—" he gasped.

Big Dave Hargan started up the slope. He stopped short as he saw the faint sheen of light on metal, the metal of the Ranger's steady blue-steel Colt.

Crazy Jake's hand flicked out. The knife drove at Jim Hatfield, and the Ranger, firing the instant Flenge made his final play, took the twelve-inch heavy-handled weapon in the waist. The point slashed into his thick leather gun-belt, deflected, and sliced a chunk of flesh from his ribs. He felt the warm blood gush from the wound, running down his leg.

Even then, the heavy Colt had kicked his hand. Flenge, half erect, with his head stuck out and arm extended as he had thrown his knife, posed for a second-fraction in that position. The Ranger's quick bullet had hit him in the bridge of the nose, and torn into his left eye, piercing his brain. Crazy Jake Flenge fell forward across Phil Barton's bleeding, trussed form.

BIG DAVE HARGAN did not attempt to draw and fire on Jim Hatfield. Horrified at the sight of his Nemesis, there in the very spot he had believed himself to be safe, Hargan screeched:

"It's him—it's the big jigger!" He stumbled down the slope, and as Hatfield, knowing the alarm was up, and that Gomez' horde was not too far off to hear and come back, sent a slug his way, Hargan fell head over heels, rolling out of sight down the hill.

Hatfield knew that if Barton were to be saved, he must act instantly. He seized Flenge's big knife, knelt beside Barton, cut the young fruit-grower's bonds.

"C'mon, Barton," he urged, as the prisoner failed to rise. "We gotta get outa here, pronto."

From the thicket and rocks where Morse had been sitting, the Ranger glimpsed the flare from a gun. A bullet rapped into the dirt by his crouched body. He swung to shoot back as he heard Hargan yelling his head off.

"It's the Ranger! He's here!"

Answering cries came from Gomez and his men, not far on their way to the road north.

The men left in the camp were running in, grabbing guns, preparing to fight.

Barton made a strenuous effort, came up on his knees. His face was blotched by bloody cuts and scratches, and his breath came in gasps. The young fellow was about all in, so knowing he could wait no longer, Hatfield quickly threw his body up under Barton, shouldering the heavy man on his left side, so that he could use his Colt in his right hand.

Resistance was fast organizing. Bullets whirled past the Ranger as he plunged into the woods, and hurried, as fast as he could with his burden, for the cliff.

They were starting up through the pines after him; now and then a slug came within a foot or two, nicking bark from a tree trunk. He held his fire, though not wishing to show them exactly where he was.

The steep cliff was right ahead, blocking him. He set Barton down, and the pursuers glimpsed his tall figure against the night sky. Bullets zipped by him, nipped at his clothes and at his Stetson. He blared back at them with his Colt, aiming for the flashes. Ever so often he heard a screech of anguish.

"Jim—is that you?"

The call came from directly below. Marshal Young was watching for him, warned by the shooting.

"Here yuh go, Marshal," called Hatfield. "Catch! It's Barton."

He ceased firing, lay flat on his stomach and eased Barton over the lip of the cliff, holding the young man under the arms until Barton was suspended below him.

"Let him go!" Young called.

The little marshal was too small to take the full force of Barton's dropping body but he was skillful and managed to catch Barton as his feet hit the ground and to break his fall.

Hatfield swung, then, and blazed back at the pines. From the camp he caught the full-throated whooping of Porfirio Gomez, returning with his men, piling up to see what was wrong.

The Ranger let himself over the edge

of the cliff, his feet seeking holds. He dropped when he was low enough, landing in a catlike heap. Marshal Young was supporting Phil Barton, across the rough shale and broken rock.

"I can walk," Barton gasped.

BUT his legs would not hold him up. He fell, carrying Marshal Young with him. Hatfield seized Barton's arms, shouldered him again and carried him to the horses.

"They can't get down that cliff with their mustangs, anyways," growled Marshal Dan.

Up above, against the silver sky, they saw the darker figures of men appear, hunting them. Some of the gunnies started down the cliff. Now the spare mount which Hatfield had thoughtfully provided, came in handy, for the Ranger and the local lawman could boost Phil Barton on the rusty mare and secure him.

"Get goin', Marshal!" the Ranger commanded. "Keep on down the way we come and I'll catch up with yuh later. Hustle Barton on home."

"Take care of yoreself, Jim," Young replied, but he made no objection to obeying the Ranger's orders. He knew that Barton would only hamper the officer in a running fight, which was obviously developing. One of them had to stick with the young fruit-grower.

As the marshal and Barton, whose head hung heavily in pain and weariness, started down Round Top, Jim Hatfield swung to delay the pursuit, his blue-steel pistols gleaming in the night light.

The terrain cut the bandits off from the west side of Round Top, save by a long detour, making it impossible for them to bring up their horses. Only on foot could they trail the fugitives. But that did not long deter them. Gunmen after gunman came swarming down the rocky cliff, and Jim Hatfield hit leather, sitting his golden sorrel to face the foe.

Gun flames were flickering on the cliff top, and from the weapons of the men who had reached the rocks at the bottom. The stabs of exploding powder showed blue-yellow in the night, giving glimpses now and then of fierce, dark faces. Hatfield, reins in left hand, knees holding the leather, fired with his right. He aimed at the gun flashes, and heard howls of anguish, the curses of men he hit.

They came at him, more and more of them dodging from cover spot to cover spot— a rock here, a bush there— shooting, shrieking their fury at the Texas Ranger who dared defy them, alone as he was. Not only had he killed Bucko Pete and Crazy Jake Flenge, but he was the man who had spoiled their ambush plans, who had cracked them in Zapata, who was the great menace to their plot to dominate the section.

He kept moving, not too fast, drawing them farther away from their camp. He went so slowly, tantalizingly ever just out of reach, that they hoped for a time that he was wounded. He fetched them directly west into a welter of jungle chaparral, away from the line of flight of Marshal Young and Phil Barton. For over an hour they stayed after him, afoot, before they realized the futility of it and found they had lost precious time they might have used in trying to beat around the mountain and cut off the fugitives.

"Reckon they've had enough of this," Hatfield decided as, with a last burst of guns and shrieking imprecations on his head, the *bravos* gave up the chase and started back for their camp.

Having accomplished his purpose, the Ranger swung north and worked as fast as the sorrel could make it for the Rio Grande.

At the first gray streaks of dawn the tall Ranger, chin strap tight under his rugged chin, face veneered with dust, clothes torn from the thorny undergrowth through which he had forced, cut the trail of Marshal Young and Phil Barton. The old marshal was making for the west ford, the little-used crossing where Hatfield and Young had swum to Mexico. From his examination of the sign, the Ranger could tell they had by this time made the river.

HE turned east and rode a winding, sandy track that took him toward the Mexican village not far from the favorite ford of Porfirio Gomez.

Some gunshots in the distance drew him. A mile on, he came upon several masked riders, in peaked sombreros, who looked like Gomez men. They had somebody holed up in the rocks, a man whose horse lay kicking in death struggles near the trail. Guns were cracking as the horsemen sought to dislodge their quarry.

"Anybody they're after, I'm for," he decided, and picked one of the *bravos* from his leather. The rest, seeing who was coming, turned and rode hell-for-leather away.

A man crawled from the rocks, at the Ranger's hail. He was a tall Mexican in a green uniform.

"*Rurale,*" muttered Hatfield.

"*Gracias,* senor," the state policeman said. "You come at a good moment." He was cool, not at all excited, despite his narrow squeak with death.

Jim Hatfield nodded. He dismounted, and held out his hand. The rays of the new day shone on the silver badge on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers.

"I'm Lieutenant Jim Hatfield, from Austin," he told the *rurale.* "Those were Gomez' rustlers."

"*Si,* I know." The Mexican policeman nodded. "Swarms of zem come down from the hills, Senor Rangaire. As for me, I am Lieutenant Juan Moreles of the Nuevo Leon police." He stuck out a hand, shaking the Ranger's, eyeing him with open admiration. "Ees anything we can do for the Texas Rangaires, Senor Hatfield?"

"Yeah, there is, I reckon. Gomez and his army are plannin' a massacre over in Zapata County, Lieutenant. We could use yore help on this side of the Rio. I guess yuh'd like to clean out that nest of rustlers as much as we would."

Hatfield quickly outlined his plan, and Moreles nodded with enthusiasm.

"I go now," he agreed, "to breeng patrols of our men. Zis morning I was riding the Bordaire when I bump' eento zose *bravos.*"

"By the way," Hatfield drawled, "I run into one of yore government's men in Zapata, Lieutenant. His name's Carstairs—Colonel Carstairs—an Englishman. Yuh savvy who he is?"

"Oh, *si, si.* Carstairs ees well known to us po-lees, senor. He works for Mexico Ceety and ees mos' clevaire man. Lame, cannot ride, and goes about een a buckboard, but he has zis—" The rurale tapped his head, nodded. "Brains, *si.* Carstairs has done man-ee import-ant theengs for us, senor. He has trace' the Red Raiders of the Rio for years. We hav' help heem."

Hatfield, facing the east, caught the glint of the rising ruby sun on metal. Gun metal, no doubt. They were not far from the trail Gomez and his raiders used in hitting Zapata and the Double Bar T. Moreles broke off, turned to stare with him.

"You are right, senor. Ees dangerous to stan' here an' talk."

A horseman topped a rise to the east, cutting off the main trail, heading toward the two officers. Suddenly Hatfield exclaimed in what was as close to excitement as he ever came.

It was Big Dave Hargan, on his yellow horse—the man who had aped Jim Hatfield and caused so much trouble in Zapata.

CHAPTER XVI

Paid in Full

JIM HATFIELD had dismounted and Goldy was standing with reins on the earth a few yards away. Big Dave Hargan had seen his arch-enemy, the Texas Ranger he mimicked and, eyes wild and red, pulled up in a sliding stop, uttering a shrill, sharp cry of alarm.

But in the instant he brought his powerful yellow mustang to a halt, Hatfield's blue-steel Colt flashed out and barked once. The Ranger saw the man jump in the saddle.

"Magnificent shot," cried Moreles, dancing up and down in excitement. "Long range for peestol, Senor Hatfield!"

Big Dave Hargan did not hesitate. Hatfield's slug had cut him in the side, but had not killed him. The yellow

mustang had pivoted and was off, the large rider low over his neck.

Jim Hatfield jumped to Goldy's saddle, mounted without touching iron of stirrup.

"See yuh later, Lieutenant!" he called back over his shoulder, as he urged the sorrel to a burst of speed. "I got to take him!"

Hargan had dropped out of sight over the slope, winding in and out of the thick chaparral. Intent as a hunting tiger on his quarry, Hatfield, drove full-tilt east on Big Dave's hot trail.

He had run about a quarter mile when his eyes, narrowed under the wide Stetson brim, seeking the dust ahead, saw newly risen alkali hanging to his right in the warming air.

"That's the main trail," he muttered, jerking the sorrel to a sliding stop.

As he brought up short, a blast of bullets came at him from the thick mesquite clumps where the trails joined. Big Dave had fled to join Gomez' raiders. A bunch of them were just coming down from Round Top on their way to Texas.

A couple of bolder spirits spurted out, quirting their horses, spurs dug cruelly deep into the sweated flanks of their wild mustangs. Yelling with full-throated hate, they charged at Jim Hatfield, who fell back along the side trail toward the spot where he had left Lieutenant Moreles.

"Reckon the *rurale'll* need a new hoss," he muttered, as he gauged the distance between the van of the riders and himself.

One man was coming on fast, twenty yards ahead of the rest. The others had leaped on their horses to pursue. Hatfield let the rider in front pick up space until, at a turn, he swung in his leather, and the blue-steel Colt steadin his long, slim hand. As the *bravo*, eyes gleaming with the thrill of the death chase tore around the curve, Hatfield fired, hit him in the head. The rider's knees relaxed, and as the horse slewed to one side, digging in his hoofs, the body crashed headfirst into the bush at the side of the trail.

Not far behind came the rest, eager for the Ranger's blood. Skillfully the golden sorrel, urged by his master's knee and whispered order, leaped toward the Mexican's wild mount. The Ranger's left hand shot out, caught the loose reins. Then Goldy turned back and they flew west.

Lieutenant Moreles, pistol in hand, stood in the trail. His dark eyes lighted as he saw Hatfield leading the spare horse.

"*Gracias,* senor," he cried, bounding into the saddle with the skill of the trained rider.

"I'll see yuh later, then, Lieutenant," Hatfield called. "I'm headin' for Zapata."

BULLETS were zipping over them, or clicking the thorned leaves of the chaparral. A slug breathed a threat of death in the Ranger's Stetson, but he was moving on west and away. Moreles spurred off southward, zigzagging off from the *bravos* who howled with impotent fury as they saw Hatfield drawing off, the long strides of the golden sorrel leaving their sweated mustangs behind.

Hitting the deep ford where he and Young had crossed on their way to Gomez' mountain eyrie, Hatfield shoved the sorrel into the swirling, tawny water. The bluffs on the Texas side rose high back of the river's bed; red rock had prevented the stream from widening a course as it would in time of freshets.

"Guess that Hargan sidewinder's plumb scared," he mused, as the sorrel began swimming the current. "If I ever seen a yaller streak, he's got one! I figger he'll head for the tall timber."

His shrewd mind told him that Big Dave's appearance, headed west alone, must have meant flight. The ex-convict and killer who had aped the Ranger in Zapata had lost his nerve. Tall timber and safety from the law lay in the fastnesses of Coahuila and Arizona.

"He'll try it north of the Rio next, Goldy," he told the sorrel. "He'll shake off them raiders soon as he can and come it alone. He's fed up, and we got to arrest him 'fore he leaves the district."

Hell had piled up high in Zapata. Quick action must be taken to smash

the minions of evil who rode the range. The men who had terrorized the inhabitants even now, Hatfield knew from what he had overheard in the bandit camp, plotted to massacre the cowmen who dared offer resistance. That plan he must checkmate. Yet he could not do it because of Hargan's activities, directed by the fiendishly clever hand of George Morse, escaped criminal.

"Yeah, we got to take Hargan," he repeated firmly.

Marshal Young had come this way, helping Phil Barton to safety. The sign was cold but the Ranger could follow it, pick it out, for he knew the peculiarities of the two horses Young had with him. The marshal's horse had a special sort of nail in his steel shoes that left an imprint the tall Ranger could read like so much printed matter.

He eased off the trail, and found a high point from which his eyes could sweep the country eastward. Down below, to his right, lay a small ranch—'dobe house, sheds, a barn and corrals. Stock grazed in the draws and cleared areas. The Rio Grande followed its tortuous, shifting course a short way to the south, and the ranch got its water from a feeder stream which cut a narrow but deep ravine to the Rio.

The tall man looked over the wild Texas scene, as his golden sorrel cropped blue grama tufts below.

For a time he rested up there, watching the trails. It was noon when he saw a black speck rise to the east, over the beaten way that passed the little ranch in the valley.

More crows flitted from the approach of a rider on the road. He could see a couple of men busy about the ranch, and then caught the sudden scintillation of the sun on metal from the direction of the oncoming horsemen.

"It's him, Goldy!" he muttered, as the rider came into view, headed for the ranch.

WITH the sorrel under him again, he hit the trail eastward, winding in and out of the mesquite.

Coming to the open spaces, Hatfield veered south, so that the rise of the land would hide his approach. He got within a hundred yards of the barn, then slid from his saddle. Softly, his boots sliding over the sandy ground, he reached the big barn and, hearing gruff voices speaking, edged around.

Near the house stood Big Dave Hargan with a scowl on his face. His long arms were akimbo as he glared at the rancher to whom he was speaking.

"I jest give yuh fifty dollars last week, Ranger," cried the cowman.

"Yuh'll hand over two hundred, and pronto," Hargan snarled, "or I'll take yuh with me, savvy? I ain't got time to argue."

"Collectin' a little money to run on," the Ranger thought.

The rancher was afraid—not for himself, perhaps, but for the woman and the children who peeked from the kitchen window nearby. He saw them there, and his face changed. No longer was there any fighting light in his eyes.

Slowly he unstrapped a money belt, pulled it from inside his sweated blue shirt.

"Here," he said, "take it. That's all I got."

As Big Dave Hargan shoved the belt into his back pocket, Hatfield stepped out from behind the barn, walking slowly toward him, his gray-green eyes on his man.

Hargan saw him coming. The tall criminal's mouth dropped, his weak chin propped up by the wide Stetson strap he wore. He turned a sickly green, and for a moment his knees shook.

"I knowed it!" he cried. "I knowed it!"

"Unbuckle and drop, Hargan," Hatfield drawled. No gun yet showed in his lean, slim hand that swung easily at his side, relaxed and ready.

The rancher was flabbergasted, too, though not with the same fear which had seized Hargan.

"It—it's a shadder," he gasped, staring from one man to the other.

"Stand aside!" Hatfield called. "Keep outa the way!"

Hargan made a play of desperation. The cowman stood so that he offered the tall masguerader cover. Big Dave's hand flipped for his walnut-stocked Colt, handy at his hip. It came out,

rising, and the hammer cocking back under his thumb with the single movement.

Jim Hatfield had to shoot. The target offered was Hargan's Stetson-covered head, showing over the cowman.

The blue-steel Colt flashed up and out with the speed of legerdemain. No man had ever beaten Hatfield in such a draw. Hargan's gun exploded, the bullet whirling past the frozen rancher's ribs to burrow into the yard dirt in front of Hatfield's spread feet. For an instant the Ranger, whose Colt had spoken a fraction of a second ahead of Hargan's, stood there in gunfighter's stance, shoulders down, body half crouched, feet wide. The blue-steel Colt sheened in the sun, with a bit of smoke curling from the round hole of its long barrel.

But Big Dave Hargan shot no more. Under the brim of his wide hat showed a bluish bullet hole, between the eyes. His knees folded up under him and his body bumped against the cowman's legs as he crashed to earth.

"MY gosh!" the rancher gasped, wiping cold sweat off his brow. "My gosh, hombre, but that was fast! Never seen anything like it!"

He was babbling in the excitement of that tense instant when Death had come to take his pick of them. The woman in the kitchen gave a shrill scream. A wrangler, the cowman's helper, came charging around from the corral, a rusty shotgun in hand.

"Stand back, Jake!" ordered the rancher.

He stared down at the dead. Jim Hatfield, coolly letting his Colt slide back into holster, stooped over Big Dave Hargan.

"Say, yuh shore look alike!" the cowman cried. "Though together I can see the diff'rence. Why, he's even got a hoss like yores! He's been makin' tall trouble in this neck of the woods."

The wrangler eased up, gulping.

"That—that was close, Boss," he muttered. And to Hatfield he said: "Yuh want me to bury him so the coyotes won't get him?"

"Not yet," Hatfield replied, his voice even.

"He had it comin', that feller did!" shouted the rancher. "Yuh saved us, Mister. Can I take back my money?"

Hatfield rolled Hargan's corpse over, pulled out the belt, and silently passed it to the man.

"Thanks, thanks," the rancher said, half hysterical with joy. "Yuh've rid the county of a terrible scourge! He's been here afore, scarin' money outa me. 'Pertection' he called it—said Gomez'd get my kids and wife if I didn't pay up. Say, jest who are yuh?"

"My name's Hatfield."

"So's his!" declared the cowman, pointing to the dead one.

"Nope. That's Big Dave Hargan, an ex-convict who's been ridin' the range sayin' he was me."

The evidence lay there and no one could dispute it.

"Is there anything I can do for yuh, Mr. Hatfield?" begged the rancher anxiously. "Will yuh have a bite? Another hoss?"

"I'll take some water for my mount and me," the Ranger said. "And if yuh got a short piece of board, I'd be able to use that."

The rancher looked mystified, but hurried to a shed and came back with a length of thick, wide board. Hatfield accepted it, and, with a whistle, called the golden sorrel.

Speed, he was well aware, was essential. He must arrive in time to save the cowmen under John Toll from the vicious ambush planned with such bold acumen, a massacre that was plotted to take place at the supposed stronghold of the ranchers, the Double Bar T. At night the raiders would creep in through the bush and overpower the guards about the house. When Toll and his friends came in for food and ammunition, weary from searching for the hidden foe, they would die.

Big Dave Hargan, who had paid in full for his evil deeds, was necessary to the Ranger's plan.

CHAPTER XVII

Lynch Mob

AS Jim Hatfield cut up through the shaddock orchard toward Phil Phil Barton's roomy, spreading adobe home, he heard the angry howl of the mob. Shots and catcalls joined in a cacaphony of sound, a swelling, menacing roar. Hatfield had heard it before, and he urged Goldy to fresh speed.

Surrounding Barton's house were nearly a hundred men, cowboys and ranchers of Zapata. They sat their horses at a distance, shaking their fists and firing their guns into the air.

"Come out, 'fore we come in and take yuh, Barton," shrieked an excited rancher, waving a lariat suggestively noosed.

John Toll was there, his face brick-red under his tanned leather hide. Leader of these fighting men, he had been diverted from his main purpose by the manipulations of the enemy. Now they were demanding Phil Barton's innocent head.

"They seen Barton at Skeleton Pass, durin' the ambush," mused Hatfield, "and what with other trouble planted on him, they're dead shore he's in cahoots with Gomez."

Up on the long veranda, in the front door of the *hacienda*, stood Marshal Dan Young, a double-barreled shotgun gripped in his hands. The muzzles pointed down but it was plain from the small officer's stance that he was ready and determined to shoot it out in defense of Phil Barton, lying weak and wounded inside. At every window showed armed men of Barton's own outfit, prepared to fight for him.

The bloody battle was swiftly drawing on. None of these men would quit. They would fight to the bitter end, and many would die.

"Toll, yuh danged fool!" roared Marshal Young, from the porch. "Yuh've made a bad mistake, I tell yuh!"

"Damn right I have!" Toll shouted back. "I made one in not killin' this sidewindin' dude Barton when I had the chance! Get back outa the way, Young! We ain't got any fight to make with yuh. It's Barton we want. Pass him out and we won't hurt nobody else."

"Never!" cried Young. "I'll shoot the first man lays a hand on him. He's hurt and he ain't had a thing to do with all yore trouble!"

"We seen him at the Pass!" shouted an angry cowman. "He tried to lead us into that ambush."

"Lynch him!" "Fetch him out!" "Let's go in and get him, boys!"

The last was received with a mad yowl and the mob surged forwards, guns rising. Marshal Young threw up his shotgun, and fired a blasting charge from one barrel, over their heads. The pellets scattered, whistling above the crowd. An excited man fired a pistol, the bullet rapping into the side of the *hacienda* and spattering Young with bits of mud and lead.

"Dismount and go get 'em!" bawled John Toll.

The infuriated ranchers meant to lynch the young man they were certain was in league with the raiders of the county.

Nearer and nearer the calm, grim Ranger came. The cowmen were intent on the attack, and did not turn to see the magnificent picture the great horseman made as he approached. Straight in the saddle, Jim Hatfield, chin strap tight under his strong jaw, the light gleaming on the rugged angles of his face, rode forward.

GUNS were up as the mob advanced with deadly intent, surging toward the door where Young stood with his feet braced for the shock. The miasma of hate rose thickly hot in the air. Men whose passions were inflamed would shoot those they had once called friend.

It was Young looking out over the mob, who first saw the great Ranger. He shouted, raised an arm high overhead. John Toll was on the veranda within a yard of Young, but the little marshal danced up and down, pointing at Hatfield.

So tense was the emotion of the men aiming to lynch Phil Barton that they refused to heed the marshal. Toll reached out and snatched away the law-

man's shotgun, for at sight of Hatfield, Young had relaxed his alertness.

Hatfield's blue-steel Colt emerging from the pleated holster, spoke. It boomed once, twice and a third time in the warm air. The heavy reports burst upon the mob. Thinking it was attack from the rear, men began turning.

Screeches of fury arose at sight of the man on the golden sorrel, and grew to tremendous volume. John Toll let go of Marshal Young, whirling and throwing the shotgun to shoulder to let go at Hatfield. Forgetting Barton for the moment in their rage against the Ranger they believed had turned criminal for love of money, the men of Zapata started at Hatfield to rend him, tear him to pieces.

No sign of alarm showed in the tall man's bearing as he came on, slowly but steadily. The steel nerve of the man in riding straight at the great crowd of armed ranchers, every one of whom believed him a murderous enemy, held their fire. Fingers that were on gun triggers refused to close, as the mob stopped its surge toward the Ranger. Men stared, refusing to believe that the man would dare ride into their midst.

Each step of the handsome sorrel ticked off like the clock of doom. It was hypnotic, this approach of the great Ranger, and John Toll's jaw dropped. A shaft of light, from a sunbeam, fell across the long, grim face of Jim Hatfield. It was as serene as a summer sky, and he was easily relaxed, in his leather.

"Hey, you!" Toll shouted, at last finding his voice.

A murmur rose in the throats of the cowmen. Such a display of daring, from friend or foe, impressed them.

Toll shouldered through to the fore. "Yuh must be loco, hombre, to ride up here!" he began. "I—"

The tall man on the sorrel had the rancher chief fixed with his level, gray-green eyes. Hatfield said nothing, as he began to roll himself a cigarette, hands deliberately busy and in sight.

Then, as Hatfield shifted Goldy with a slight knee pressure, John Toll saw the horse which the Ranger led behind him. Toll broke off short, his eyes popping at the sight.

Behind the tall jigger stood a second horse, a yellow mustang with ears laid back. On the saddle was a slumped, bedraggled figure. A length of board, fastened to the cantle, propped up the dead man and a lariat wound about the corpse held it in place. The head drooped on the chest.

Jim Hatfield reached over and, placing his hand under the chin, raised the head so all could look upon the man he had brought in. It was what was left of Big Dave Hargan, Hatfield's double, and in death Hargan made a scarecrow imitation of the mighty Texas Ranger who had brought him to book.

THE lean rancher chief stared at the dead man, then back at the stern face of Hatfield. The cool, gray-green eyes on him made him drop his gaze, and a red flush came up under his tanned hide. In confusion the mob recoiled, shocked to realization of the truth by Hatfield's dramatic, shrewd play.

"See for yoreself, gents," drawled Hatfield, one leg crooked around his saddle horn. "Meet what's left of Big Dave Hargan, who killed Ranger Lew Thorn and rode this range with his badge sayin' he was me."

Toll gulped, hunting words. "Fixed up like you, same color hoss and all?" he growled finally. "No wonder we was fooled—and we shore was fooled, Mister Big Jigger."

Now they were looking at the silver star on a silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers, which Hatfield held in the palm of his slim hand.

"Yeah, you've been fooled, Toll—fooled mighty bad," agreed Hatfield. "Not only 'bout me and the Rangers but 'bout Barton. Gomez kidnapped him, showed him to yuh at Skeleton Pass to lead yuh into believin' Barton was workin' against yuh. Barton's all right, gents."

"That's right," cried Marshal Young, coming up to hear the Ranger's words. "That's gospel, John. This Ranger saved yore hides at the Pass. If it hadn't been for his quickness yuh'd have died like dogs in that ambush gully. And after he saved yuh, yuh gunned him."

Toll was abashed, realizing, from Hatfield's unanswerable argument in bringing in Hargan, the mistakes into which the cowmen had been drawn. In the crowd, a few minutes before a howling, murderous mob, men came to their senses, began replacing their guns in holsters, putting away ropes with which they had intended to lynch Phil Barton.

Jim Hatfield, expert at striking while the iron was hot, at organizing citizens against the evil factions who sought to batten on their blood, straightened in his saddle, raising a hand overhead.

"Gents," he cried, "Marshal Young and me brought Barton down out of Porfirio Gomez' camp in Mexico. While I was up there, I done overheard some of the enemy's plans. Tonight, soon as it's dark, they mean to filter in and take the Double Bar T. When yuh get back there, yuh'll have a surprise waitin'. They'll shoot yuh down and break the law wide open in Zapata."

The sight of the dead Hargan, as well as hearing Yong's earnestness, had convinced Toll and his friends of their error. They were now ready to listen to Ranger Hatfield, and believe whatever he said.

"C'mon, then, find yore hosses and we'll get back and beat 'em to it," growled John Toll.

"Wait!"

That was Hatfield's strong voice, taking the command. Watching the rugged face of the great fighting man, they fell under his domination.

"He's a real Ranger, and the best I ever seen," declared a rancher enthusiastically. "I'm with him, boys."

They all were. Hatfield's soft drawl captured them, as he gave them their orders.

"If yuh go ridin' in to the ranch now," he remarked, "yuh'll jest warn 'em, 'cause they'll see yuh. We'll work in close as we can while it's light, then dismount and hide till dark. Reckon we can manage to filter in ahead of Gomez, gents."

Guns were checked, spare bullets dropped into pockets. Busily, under Hatfield's command, the cowmen of Zapata prepared for the biggest fight of their lives.

HATFIELD led John Toll aside. "Reckon it's up to yuh, Toll, to shake hands with Phil Barton," he suggested. "Mebbe he does raise trees but he's been a good neighbor."

Toll scowled, but with the gray-green eyes upon him, he shrugged and strolled in to the *hacienda*. Hatfield was at his heels.

Phil Barton was propped in a chair in his bedroom. Bandages covered the cuts and burns on his face. His young eyes were weary. What he had gone through had been terrible, had left him weakened and hurt, but youth would come to his aid and all he needed was rest and care for a time.

He sought the stern face of Toll as the lean rancher strode into his room. A smile of relief and pleasure broke on Barton's lips as Toll thrust out his hand.

"All right, Barton," Toll muttered. "Damn sorry I got things mixed up. This here gent sorta put me straight."

"That's all right," Barton exclaimed joyfully. "Hatfield has put a lot of us straight, Toll." He knew who had carried him out of Gomez' camp and the jaws of death. What the Ranger said was, to Barton, the law.

"We're headin' for the Double Bar T, Barton," Hatfield told him. "Gomez means to attack the ranch."

"Then you'll need all the help you can find. Toll, I can spare a dozen fighting men. Take them with you."

"Thanks a-mighty," growled John Toll.

The dangerous feud, fostered by the common enemy of Zapata, had been ended by Jim Hatfield's shrewd work. But the Ranger was aware of how much yet remained to be accomplished. Gomez, with a hundred outlaw guns at his beck and call, still rode the range unharmed. He must be smashed before Zapata would sleep easily of nights. And, behind him, lurked the ominous, murderous shadow that was George Morse, arch-criminal and sworn enemy of Jim Hatfield. Crazy Jake Flenge and Bucko Pete, Big Dave Hargan, had died; but Morse still trod the range.

Someone had arrived. They heard the sound of beating hoofs. Hatfield,

glancing through the wide window at the crowd of ranchers, busily engaged in furbishing their weapons for a fight, saw Dorothy Toll gallop up to the *hacienda* on a white mare. Strained fear was on her face, a fear that was heightened at sight of the cowmen about Barton's home.

"Is—is my father here?" she asked anxiously.

"Inside, with Barton," a man told her.

Then she entered, and sighed with relief as she saw the friendly attitude of Toll, seated near Phil Barton.

"Phil! You—you're all right?"

He smiled at her, took her hand. "Just battered a bit, Dorothy."

John Toll stared at the two. Their glances betrayed them. Then he shrugged and rose.

"*Adios,*" Barton," he said dryly. "Reckon I'll be seein' yuh—quite a bit."

Hatfield hid his grin as he followed the lean cowman chief outside.

"Never figgered on havin' a farmer for a son-in-law," Toll remarked.

CHAPTER XVIII

Mass Battle

PHIL BARTON saw to it that food was served to the ranchers. They ate and drank, rested, getting ready for the decisive battle that Hatfield intended to force.

Then Jim Hatfield started out on the golden sorrel, scouting the way toward the Double Bar T. There was a north road they might follow, a different route from the one the raiders would probably use in coming up from Mexico.

Behind Hatfield, in small groups according to the strategy worked out by the Ranger and Toll, came the armed men of Zapata, those who had banded together against Gomez. Posts had been assigned each group, under a lieutenant.

When the night fell swift and sudden over Zapata, and the dense chaparral was rustling in the breeze, Jim Hatfield was within a mile of the ranch buildings. Broken country lay about him. They had passed across the line of hills to the north of Skelton Pass, and pastures, cleared by man or Nature, spotted the land.

The moon was up, and the alternate patches of light and shadow dotted the rolling range. Cows were about, grazing in bunches. Hatfield sought to avoid alarming them, for they might well stampede and give warning to the men he hoped to trap.

The tall lawman slid from his saddle when he glimpsed the lights of the Double Bar T through the mesquite and live-oaks. The house seemed deserted; quiet reigned over the spot.

With the caution of a red Indian, Hatfield began to scout, in a circle, to make sure that there were no lurking spies watching. To move easily he took off his spurs and leather chaps, protection against the thorns of the bush.

Easing through the numerous paths that cut the jungle outside the clearings, he paused often to listen. And, on the east side of the ranch buildings, he smelled the odor of fresh burning tobacco.

Frozen flat to the warm dirt, the Ranger waited, his eyes strained in the direction from which the gentle breeze came, carrying that telltale aroma. Within half an hour the cowmen would begin filtering in, their horses left outside the circle, on the north, guarded by designated men. A word of alarm to the crafty Gomez would mean the ruin of Hatfield's counterplot.

For a time intense silence reigned as the tall Ranger lay stretched in the mesquite shadow. Then a man gave a low cough, his throat caught by the acrid smoke of his cigarette.

"Not so loud, *compadre,*" another man said in Spanish. "They'll hear you."

It placed them for the Ranger. They were outside of the light radius that had the ranchhouse as the center of the circle. He drew away and worked to the south so as to come up against the darker arc of the sky. Inch by inch, using the rustlings caused by little puffs of the wind to hide the faint

swish of his body on the dry ground, he approached. The sudden glow of a cigarette caught his eye, and the red glow illuminated the dark-skinned, evil face of a raider under the peaked sombrero. They did not expect to be seen, and hence did not have their masks raised.

"Got to take 'em, or they'll stop Gomez," he mused. "And I got to do it quiet."

There was probably another patrol within gunshot hearing of the advance spies, he figured, ready to relay any alarm to the main band, no doubt hidden within a mile or two of the ranch.

So it was that the Ranger approached with the stealthy care of a stalking tiger as he came up behind the two. Their horses stood near at hand, back of a thick mesquite clump, its aromatic white blossoms dotting the black bushes in the night.

He was within two yards of them when a stick, buried in the droppage of leaves, cracked under his weight. The two Mexicans whirled around.

Hatfield was squatted, his powerful legs drawn up under him, his blue-steel Colt gripped in right hand, barrel out. He dared not fire, however, for that would mean the spoiling of his plan.

"Is all well, *compadres?*" he growled in Spanish. "*El jefe* sent me to say he comes."

He was approaching from the opposite direction to the ranch and his ruse fooled them for the instant he needed to launch himself through the air upon them.

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped the Mexican on his left.

A viselike left hand had him by the throat, choked off his wind. He squirmed in Hatfield's grip, writhing like a snake pinned under a stick. The Ranger's right had lashed out, the Colt barrel slashing with a sharp, distinct crack on the temple of the second man.

Sure that he had knocked one man out, the Ranger turned his attention to the second, whose hand had flashed to his pistol, still in its holster. With a mighty heave of his powerful, whipcord-muscled body, Hatfield turned the fighting, choked raider under him, drove a knee into his belly. The efficiency of the fighting Ranger appalled the Mexican. He began to sob, gasping for wind. The dark eyes rolled, tears starting from the constriction of his throat. Hatfield slid his gun from his holster.

"You wish to live, *vaquero?*" he growled in the *bravo's* ear.

The man showed he did. Gun rammed into the fellow's ribs, Hatfield ordered:

"If yuh yell I'll blow yore guts loose, savvy? Quick! Tie up yore mate and stick his bandanna into his mouth."

HE watched the Mexican, ready to smash him down if he made a false move or tried to cry out. But the man had recognized the Ranger, knew who had him. He had seen this man in action, in Zapata town, and up at the Mexican stronghold of Gomez.

With whites of his eyes visible in his fright, the raider tied up his unconscious mate, gagged him. Checking with his free left hand the Ranger found he had done a good job.

"Hide him into the mesquite," he commanded.

A slanting beam of moonlight fell across the rugged face of the great Ranger. Drawn to grim lines, the wide mouth was set, determined, and the eyes were cold as an Arctic sea, dark and icy. The *vaquero* stammered for mercy.

"Quiet!" Hatfield ordered.

He picked up the sombrero of the man who was dumped in the bush, changed it for his own. Back in the shadows, he squatted, with his prisoner close to him and toward the narrow cow trail which they had been watching.

"They comin' in this way?" he demanded.

He was fairly certain they would be, though. That was why these spies were at the spot, but he wished to check the pliability of his captive. As the Mexican hesitated, Hatfield jabbed him in the ribs with his Colt muzzle.

"*Si—si,* beeg senor," the *vaquero* hurriedly whimpered. "Zey come zis way!"

From the east, brought on the night wind, came the faint crackling of bush,

and the soft sound of hoofs. The ground carried the vibrations of many heavy weights. Gomez, with his band of raiders, was approaching.

They had their horses muzzled, the noses of the animals bound with cloth strips to prevent any whinnying that might betray their presence.

"When they ask yuh, say all's well," Hatfield whispered in his prisoner's ear. "Or else I'll kill yuh!"

The *vaquero* shivered, huddled in front of Hatfield. Weaving in on the trail, the Ranger spotted a mounted Mexican, the peaked sombrero high, with gleaming conchas along the crown silhouetted against the night sky.

"*Compadre,*" his muffled tones called softly, "is all well?"

The Ranger's steady Colt muzzle was against the Mexican's ribs. Hatfield stayed squatted down, his head dropped so that only the sombrero showed to the mounted man. In Spanish the Gomez spy replied, voice low: "*Si,* all is well!"

THE rider pivotted his hairy mustang and trotted back to report.

More and more riders came sifting in from the east. Porfirio Gomez appeared for a moment, giving his final instructions. Hatfield, in the bush at the side of the cow trail with his captive under the gun, heard some of them.

"Leave your horses with six guards, at this spot," Gomez ordered. "I will stay mounted, outside, *vaqueros.* The rest of you creep in as you have been told, strangle any guards about the house, but leave no warning sign. Toll should be back by dawn."

Swiftly the raiders dismounted. Reins were gathered into bunches, and half a dozen men held the great lines of mustangs. Gomez disappeared in the darkness.

The horse lines, on the east of the ranch buildings, were far enough out so that the animals could not give any alarm to the approaching cowmen, should they be returning to headquarters. The raiders expected to seize the house and bunkhouse, the barns and sheds. And once the ranchers were inside the deadly circle, they would riddle them.

Hatfield remained where he was until the various bands of Mexicans and other bandits had split off, and started creeping toward the clearing. He could feel the trembling of the man he held under his gun. A hundred yards away stood the horses, the means of escape never neglected by an sagacious leader. Gomez was out of hearing, and for half an hour the tall lawman waited in a tense silence.

He peered through the bushes toward the house, could just see the dim-lit yellow rectangles of the living-room. Every living thing on the ranch appeared to be asleep. Then, against the side window, he saw a sombrero rise, knew that the raiders were in.

There was no firing. Hatfield had emphasized the fact that the ranchers, hidden in the buildings, must allow the main body of raiders to get into the clearing before the fight opened.

"Hope they got themselves set in time," he thought fervently.

The battle opened five minutes later. One instant the velvet night was serene and calm, brooding in majestic silence. The next, a shrill, sharp scream rang out, and then a single gunshot.

Two seconds later a roaring, smashing volley made the air hideous—and the curses and shouts of fighting men came between the punctuated shots. Jim Hatfield could see the dark shadows of foes in the clearing as the cowmen, having riddled the bandits with their lead from cover leaped out to lock horns with the foe. Small bands of Toll's gunfighters jumped up from hiding places in the mesquite, running forward to cut off retreat.

Jim Hatfield struck at the man he had held under his gun, knocked him over, and leaped to his feet. Not far off stood the horses, and he headed that way, both pistols ready.

Around to the north flank of the mustangs, with their guards turned anxiously toward the sound of the terrible battle waging in the clearing, the Ranger gave a shrill whistle, and hustled toward the horse lines. Bullets from his blue-steel guns drove into the raiders holding those reins. They had their hands full of leather straps, and shouted for help.

One dropped his straps, digging for his iron. A bullet whirled into the mesquite above the crouched Ranger. An instant fraction later Hatfield put a slug through the man. The freed mustangs, rearing and kicking, broke into small bunches and began running off through the chaparral.

The Ranger's hot bullets whirled toward the guards. They dared not hold longer, but let go, ducking for cover, as his guns approached, the red-blue flashes and stentorian roaring explosions stunning in the night.

But help was coming for the men who had had the horses torn from their grasps. The confused mass of raider mounts began to mill. Hatfield knew he must scatter them before the expert riders came back.

Already some of the fighting men who had crept in on the house were hustling to find their horses knowing they had walked into a trap within a trap.

A golden shape, brought by the Ranger's shrill whistling, galloped up, and the tall man hit leather in a single bound, his long legs gripped about the gelding's ribs. He threw off his sombrero and, bareheaded in the night, the wind sweeping through his jet-black hair, rugged face set, he rode straight at the milling mustangs.

Placed shots, whoops, set them to breaking off. Goldy knew this business, and with bites and kicks helped them on.

He had driven most of them off before a wad of armed raiders, gasping for breath after a swift run, hotly pursued by cowmen afoot, drew up to find their way of escape gone.

Howls of frustrated fury rose on the night air. A burst of bullets whirled past Hatfield. He felt the nick of lead at his ribs, and the flip as a slug clipped his black hair. Goldy leaped madly as his hide was furrowed, and the tall Ranger swung the sorrel with a jerking rein, galloping off to the north.

At bay, the raiders turned to shoot it out with those chasing them.

Full-tilt, the Ranger rode for the clearing. The battle still continued, with men locked in the fury of a fight to the death. Groups fired pointblank at one another or, guns empty for the instant, leaped to bodily engagement.

Pouring Colt bullets into the masked, deadly fighting men of Porfirio Gomez, Hatfield rode around the circle.

But the surprise arranged for them by the Ranger had meant half the battle. A dozen had felt lead in the first volley from the concealed cowmen. Others had taken it on the run, and the rest were trapped in the clearing, shooting it out with the foe.

"Things're goin' fine," muttered Hatfield, pausing in the shadows to reload his hot Colts.

The golden sorrel whinnied, and threw up his head, his magnificent mane shaking. A shrieking, cursing cursing figure, mounted on a giant pinto stallion with pink eyes, a horse among horses, whirled into view. In his right hand he held a Colt that blasted in at the cowmen; in his left he gripped a great blacksnake whip, which he cracked with the madness of despair as he saw his gunmen being shot down or captured.

"Fight, *vaqueros!*" screamed Porfirio Gomez.

CHAPTER XIX

To the Death!

CRUEL and inhuman as he was, the Mexican chieftain was no coward. He drove in, spurring the pinto cruelly as the great stallion galloped full-tilt at a bunch of ranchers with John Toll at their head. The blacksnake whip whizzed, cracking the dim-lit area of the clearing. It wound around a rancher's head, tore out his eye, cut the flesh of his cheeks to ribbons. Gomez, teeth bared under his little mustache and ground together in hatred and fury, fired into another cowman's back.

The furious attack of the chief made the men with Toll draw back. Confused shouts rose, and the raiders broke off, escaping into the mesquite. Toll alone stood his ground, and Porfirio Gomez, yanking back the long blacksnake whip, aimed and slashed at him. Toll's arm

caught the worst sting of it. It tore the flesh, and he reeled, falling as he fired. His bullet drove through Gomez' high-crowned sombrero.

Jim Hatfield was speeding across to where Gomez sought to kill John Toll. The leader of the cowmen was down on his knees as Gomez spurred the pinto stallion at him. Hatfield had to fire, and quickly. There was no time for aim, and the jolting of the golden sorrel under him made the shot practically impossible.

The blue-steel Colt in the Ranger's slim hand blared, kicked back against his palm.

The pinto stallion veered a bit, but enough to miss Toll with his cutting, murderous hoofs. Toll's arm hung helpless, bleeding from the trrible sting of Gomez' lash. That bullet sent by Hatfield had cut through the Mexican's leather chap, burnt his leg, kissed the pinto's creamy-white spot just ahead of the rider's bent knee.

The drive of the pinto carried Gomez on yards beyond Toll. As the handsome Mexican, teeth bared in a snarl of fury, turned the horse and prepared to drive back and finish Toll, he saw the Ranger beating down upon him.

For an instant Jim Hatfield thought Gomez meant to stand and fight, to charge at him with that flicking lash. He set himself for the shock. About him ranchers and gunnies still fought, although the former were rapidly triumphant, taking prisoners, chasing fugitives into the chaparral.

Across a short space the two eyed one another. The Ranger had a Colt in one hand, the other used to guide the beautiful sorrel, galloping full-speed for the pinto horse.

With a shriek of rage, shrill with passion, Gomez fired. The bullet touched Hatfield's sheek, left a red sear. The Ranger shot, and Gomez suddenly whirled and heeled his spurs deep into the pinto.

Hatfield, low over the bounding sorrel, drove straight after the Mexican chieftain as Gomez headed for the chaparral. There was no time for the Mexican to seek a path; the pinto turned sideward as he hit the thorned mesquite wall, crashing on through by sheer momentum. Goldy, aware of the game, with nostrils wide and mane and tail flying, galloped up and without hesitating followed in the path the pinto smashed.

"That pinto hoss is too good to shoot, Goldy," Hatfield muttered.

The Ranger loved horses. He would not kill the pinto stallion if he could help it.

HE could hear Gomez, cursing and crashing through the dense bush ahead of him. In the darkness outside the clearing it was difficult to see detail. He did not know if his last shot had taken effect on Porfirio Gomez, but concentrated on staying on the man's trail so as not to lose him in the night.

The pinto stallion found a cow trail a hundred yards to the northwest of the clearing, turned along it, picking up speed. Goldy bounded out, swung onto the trail, and settled down to a race.

Bareheaded, Hatfield rode, urging the golden sorrel on with a low crooning.

"Catch him, Goldy!" he begged.

Inch by inch the great gelding picked up speed, over taking the incredibly fast pinto. Gomez rode low over the pinto stallion's white-and-pink-spotted neck. In and out of the winding, narrow trails they flashed. Now and then Hatfield could glimpse the rider ahead, desperately trying to escape the Ranger at his heels, unable to shake him off.

They came onto a straightaway, and Hatfield knew that Goldy was slowly catching up. With a final burst of speed, the Ranger urged the sorrel up, and Gomez, dark eyes flashing back as he looked over his shoulder, uttered a shrill cry of despair.

Suddenly Gomez yanked hard on his reins, the cruel curved bit jerking the pinto's head up. The great horse reared, staggering, nearly falling. Up high on his hind legs, the pinto stallion rose, and Goldy slid on all four hoofs, trying to stop.

Hatfield could not shoot Gomez, with the belly of the pinto between him and his man. Gun ready, slewed around and nearly hurled from his seat by the terrific strain, Hatfield raised his arm just in time to break the force of the Mexican's stinging lash. His gun arm

was cut to the bone as blood gushed from it. The awful force of the blow stung him to madness.

He felt it bite at his cheek, take a hunk of flesh with it. Goldy leaped high, legs stiff. It was the sorrel who gave the Ranger his chance, then. Goldy leaped at the pinto stallion, teeth driving in the animal's shoulder, forehoofs drumming against the pinto's ribs as the horse came down.

The pinto fell back, staggered by the sorrel's attack, and Gomez' bullet missed Hatfield by inches. A fraction of an instant later Hatfield, wiping the blood from his eyes, fired pointblank into Gomez' face.

The Colt bullet ripped through the Mexican's teeth, drove up through the roof of his mouth, and lodged in his brain. As the gorgeous, quivering pinto stood stock-still his rider's legs relaxed. Porfirio Gomez slid from his saddle dead.

Back in the ranch clearing, the gunfire had ceased. The voices of triumphant cowmen sounded in the night. The battle was ending, with evil vanquished. . . .

* * * * *

INJURED as he was, Phil Barton, felt contented and happy at last. The ending of the feud between John Toll and himself meant a great deal to the young fruit-grower, who hated such friction. Barton desired to be friendly with people, to grow his trees in peace. And now, above all else, he wanted Dorothy Toll.

Her father had left her at Barton's, for safety, when they went to catch Gomez' gang in the trap at the Double Bar T.

The two young people ate supper together, served by Barton's Mexicans. Outside, Barton's remaining men, armed and watchful, kept guard on the *hacienda.*

After supper they sat out on the long veranda, aware of the moon and stars. A gentle breeze blew across the range from the east. The wind brought with it the faint creaking of a wagon approaching on the road from Zapata.

"Who could that be?" Dorothy asked.

"Sounds like Colonel Carstairs' buckboard. He's lame, you know, and has to use a wagon to get around in. Carstairs came here, said he was selling fine horses. I bought one from him. The men who kidnaped me the other night knocked Carstairs out. And I saw a card he had in his wallet, Dorothy."

"What was it?"

Barton lowered his voice. "He's an agent for the Mexican government. I don't know what he is doing over here, but it must be something important."

They heard the challenge of Barton's men, set along the road, and Carstairs' British voice answering.

"Send the colonel here," called Phil.

Carstairs drew up in his buckboard, got down, crossed to the steps with his difficult, limping stride. He nodded pleasantly, greeting Phil and the girl.

"Excuse me if I don't get up," Barton said. "You know I was carried off to Gomez' camp, Colonel, and injured considerably."

"I met a Double Bar T man on the trail," Carstairs replied gravely. "He told me something of it, Barton." And Carstairs added, "I've come on an important mission, sir. I hate to disturb Miss Toll, but I must speak to you alone for a moment."

"Certainly," Dorothy said, and went inside the house.

Carstairs drew a chair close to Barton's.

"Perhaps you know, Barton, that I'm not really a dealer in horses? Or do you?"

"I saw your identification card as a member of the Mexican Secret Service, Colonel, when you lay unconscious in your room."

"Good. I will be frank with you, sir. Five years ago there was a fearful robbery at Monterrey, Mexico, where the Government smelter and mint stands. There were fifteen robbers involved, most of them Mexicans. Ever since that time I have worked steadily on the problem, for the band, after drugging the soldiers' *tequilla* escaped with a million dollars worth of gold bullion and paper money, loaded on fast pack horses. In their desperate escape they killed hawf a dozen of the mint guards, and with fiendish cunning made the

Rio and crossed to the Texas side."

Carstairs paused, and his strong eyes fixed Barton's. The young fruit-grower was mystified, but listened with interest to the Englishman's story.

"THE men were masked, of course, but it was believed three of them were Americans. However, after crossing to Texas—and I narrowed it down until I am sure they came to Zapata County—they dropped out of sight as though the earth had swallowed them. None of the Mexicans could ever be traced. The gold and bills, so far as we know, have not been spent. Of course, it became plain to me after a time that the raiders must have cached their stolen goods and left the vicinity. In my opinion the three Texans, after using the Mexicans to get and hide the gold, massacred them all.

"It was not until I heard of the strange events about your ranch that I suddenly fancied I could supply the answer as to where this cache might be. Barton, I am certain the gold is hidden upon your land, probably in that particular shaddock orchard just below here. Only that could explain the queer signs which have bothered you. Those holes in the earth—they were the marks of long crowbars driven deep, hunting this fortune."

"But—but why hunt it, if they had buried it?"

"Because," explained Carstairs, "when you planted your orchard there, you destroyed the landmarks they left. Unless they dug up the earth for many rods about, which of course you did not allow them to do, they could not find their cache."

"And you think these robbers have come back and have been hunting the hidden gold and money? You've found out who they were?"

Colonel Carstairs nodded. "I have worked a long while on the problem, sir. It is only in the past two days that I have learned what I have sought. Some weeks ago three convicts escaped from the Texas State Prison. One, known as Bucko Pete, was recently shot dead in Zapata. A second, I understand from friends among the Mexican *rurales*, was killed by Ranger Hatfield in the Sierra Madres. The third, George Morse, the leader, was this afternoon observed and pursued by the *rurales* as he crossed the Rio Grande. This paper I have here was found on his body—for he refused to surrender and the police were forced to shoot him."

Carstairs struck a match, held it so Barton could see a sheet of paper, once white, but now folded and dirty. Phil Barton noted a circle on the right with "Split Oak" written inside and a compass point "W." At the left was a square box scrawled in pencil: "Boulder marked X." Across the bottom: "Twenty paces of mine from split oak direct east toward the cross marked on rock."

"These landmarks," continued Carstairs, "were destroyed, as I said, by your orchards, Barton. However, this Morse and his two cronies knew approximately where they had hidden the vast loot. Obviously it is on the hillside among your shaddock trees, where these men have sought to locate it, but were hampered by your employes. The government for which I work begs permission to dig for the cache. We will replace your trees and pay for any damage done. I have laborers coming and I hope you will give me the necessary authority."

"Certainly," agreed Barton. "My own men will move the trees, Colonel, as they're experts and can do it without much harm to them."

"Thank you."

BARTON hailed his new foreman. "Smythe," he said, as the Texan came to the veranda rail, "call out your orchard men and fetch shovels and picks. You'll be under Colonel Carstairs' orders and will shift any of the shaddocks he indicates."

"Yes, sir," Smythe replied. "When yuh wanta start, Colonel?"

"If it's all right," Carstairs said, "we'll begin now, Barton. I have a number of peons coming up and we can work by torchlight."

Carstairs limped off. Barton, sitting with Dorothy later, saw the red glow of the torches—tarred sticks

stuck in the earth—and on the hillside to the south the dark figures of many men at work. Dimly to them came the clank of shovels and picks on stone, the gruff orders of foremen directing the crew of Mexican laborers Carstairs had fetched to the spot.

"I'm worried about Father," the girl said. "I hope nothing goes wrong at the ranch."

Barton touched her soft hand. "Hatfield will handle it, I know," he told her gently. "We'll hear soon, I'm sure, that your people have won."

But the hours ran on. It was close to midnight, and Barton saw that Dorothy was tired, her face white as she turned to him.

"Go to bed and try to sleep," he ordered. "I'll send a man over to see what's happened at your father's. I want to let the Ranger know about the cache here, too. Now I understand the meaning of the questions they asked me in Gomez' camp, before Hatfield saved me."

The girl kissed him, and went inside. Barton, moving stiffly, his muscles aching from the beatings he had received at the hands of the bandits, called one of his riders and handed him a note to deliver to Hatfield at the Double Bar T, cautioning him, however, to take care how he approached.

Then the young fruit-grower retired, fell asleep with the red torchlight on his window panes, and the faint sound of the working men coming on the gentle breeze.

CHAPTER XX

Escape

WHEN the great battle which he had won for the cowmen of Zapata was over, Jim Hatfield returned to the ranch. Behind him, slung across the saddle of the beautiful paint horse, jounced the body of Porfirio Gomez, his bandit career brought to an abrupt end by the guns of the Texas Ranger.

All resistance had ceased. Those gunnies who could, had seized horses and escaped, ridden for the fords across the Rio Grande, to scatter in the fastnesses of the mountains. Three quarters of Gomez' great army of fighting men had been shot down or else were herded together, watched by armed Texans. Zapata was safe, no longer forced to pay tribute to save itself from death and violence.

The tall man on the golden sorrel walked his mount across the lighted yard. A cheer rose in the throats of the citizens he had offered his life to assist. But for him, they knew, they would have died, ambushed by the cunning, ferocious Raiders of the Rio.

The shafts of light from lamps, lanterns and torches that hung from the corral posts, fell across the rugged face of the Ranger, torn and bloody from the fray. Blood stained his clothes, and the sorrel, too, showed the wounds of battle.

John Toll had had his face bathed and bandaged. His arm, likewise, had been taken care of.

Jim Hatfield, modest as he was brave, managed to slip from the crowd of men who congratulated and thanked him. There were womenfolk about, wives of Toll's men; they were busy bandaging wounds, and cooking coffee and a meal for the tired but happy crew.

There was plenty for the Ranger to do, after he had tied up his injuries and had something to eat. Prisoners must be questioned, and Hatfield still had on his mind the elusive George Morse, whom he had ticketed as the chief of the trouble in Zapata.

The raiders questioned shrugged. They were through, and the corpse of Gomez told them the gang was done for.

"*Si*—George Morse! Ees Porfirio's frien'."

Hatfield learned, as he pumped the men, that Gomez had run into Morse, Bucko Pete and Crazy Jake on the range. With more difficulty he drew out the facts of Ranger Lew Thorn's murder, how Thorn had caught up with Gomez and his rustled cows; how Morse had shot him in the back, killed him, and fixed Big Dave Hargan up to ape Jim Hatfield. Morse, the bandits agreed, hated Hatfield, had sworn to kill him.

But none could say where Morse was now.

John Toll, well after midnight, despatched a messenger to Barton's, to let Dorothy and Phil know about the great victory. "How many yuh reckon got away, Hatfield?" asked Toll.

The Ranger shrugged, "Twenty, mebbe. They'll head back to Mexico. Mebbe Morse 'll do the same."

In his mind, now that the army of gunmen had been disposed of as an immediate threat to the peace of Texas, he was busily turning over what he had learned during his difficult, dangerous investigation of Morse's criminal activities. He recalled the questions put to Phil Barton, at Gomez' camp; and these fitted in with manifestations reported by the fruit-grower of mysterious doings at night on the hillside near the *hacienda*.

"Morse must have a cache, mebbe old loot he buried 'fore I arrested him in Laredo," he decided. Then he shook his head. "But why couldn't he get it out?"

FINDING John Toll again, he asked:

"How long's Barton been in these parts, Toll?"

"Oh, two, three years."

"He dug his land up a lot, plantin' them trees?"

"Shore, yuh'd hardly know it. Why do yuh ask?"

"That would destroy landmarks. If Morse done had a cache there, and I arrested him 'fore he could spend it, that'd explain why he'd hate me so. Make a man loco to know he was rich and yet couldn't get at it."

He wanted George Morse, the man he knew had encouraged Porfirio Gomez to expand to big-time crime; the man who had killed Ranger Lew Thorn.

Quiet and deliberate, the Texas Rangers, a handful of men in the tremendous districts of Texas, maintained their hold by dispensing a crude but honest justice. The murder of a Ranger must be paid for by the blood of the killer. No man might shoot a Ranger and escape.

Goldy must rest; so must his master. Trail could not be followed in the night. Hatfield snatched a few hours respite.

He was up at the first streaks of the dawn, refreshed, ready to go. Saddling the sorrel, he swung for the east trail and Phil Barton's.

"If Morse has got a cache on Barton's land," he muttered to the golden gelding, "he won't give up till he finds it."

Peace at last brooded over Zapata, thanks to Jim Hatfield. Men could ride the trails and roads in safety, and a rancher might live without paying tribute to brutal killers. But there still was work for the Ranger who had brought that about.

The sun rose, higher and higher, as Goldy trotted toward the *hacienda*. Skirting the ridges that petered out north of Skeleton Pass, Hatfield rolled a quirly and smoked on his way under the warming sky. Birds flitted in the chaparral; he saw groups of cows grazing here and there.

He was not far from the *hacienda*, could look across the rolling land and see the gleaming white adobe walls, and the small, neat trees planted in rows, planted with loving care by Phil Barton. Then his keen eyes saw the *caracaras*, the Mexican vultures, settling in the bush to the right. Their raucous cries made the sorrel sniff and whinny, jerk his handsome head.

Curious, Hatfield diverged, and a few yards from the trail leading to Barton's from the Double Bar T, he came upon a man's corpse. He had been shot through the head, and had been dead for some hours. He was a Texan, and Hatfield recognized him as one of Barton's men.

He returned to the trail, and pushed on to the *hacienda*. Barton was seated on the porch with Dorothy Toll, and he eagerly hailed his friend Hatfield as the tall Ranger saluted, and got down, his spurs clinking as he stepped up on the porch.

"I jest run on one of yore men—a sandy-haired hombre—shot dead in the bush over yonder, Barton."

Phil Barton started, as swift sorrow crossed his face.

"Why—that must be Gregory. I

sent him to the Double Bar T last night, with a message to John Toll and to you. Colonel Carstairs was here and he had a full explanation for the mysterious troubles to which I've been subjected. Five years ago the Mexican mint and smelter at Monterrey was raided by three Texans. One was a man named George Morse, the other two were his aides. They had a band of Mexicans with them, but Carstairs is sure after the Texans got a great amount of gold and money, and dug it into the ground which is now mine, that they killed all of their helpers."

Hatfield listened, ticketing the information which Phil Barton had obtained from the Mexican Government's agent, Carstairs.

When Barton finished, Hatfield asked softly:

"And he done found it?"

"Yes. It was buried in the hillside."

"And where's the colonel now?"

"Taking the stolen treasure back to Mexico City."

Hatfield swung, mounted Goldy, rode to the south hillside, and looked over the spot. Trenches a dozen feet deep had been run by the many peon laborers brought up by Carstairs. Crisscrossed along the hillside, they had finally run against the stone-lined hole, now gaping empty in the bright daylight.

The Ranger did not return to the *hacienda* but hit the trail for the ford south of Barton's.

"He knowed too much," he mused.

Late that afternoon, after crossing the Rio Grande, he was challenged by armed *rurales* watching the ford. Lieutenant Moreles waited, not far off, and the Ranger, after identifying himself, was escorted to him. Moreles showed his white teeth in a smile of welcome.

"How many did yuh catch?" asked Hatfield.

"Feefteen, all wanted by us here," replied Moreles. "Thanks for the tip, and for driving zem into our hands."

"'Twas a pleasure. There's a question I want to ask yuh, Lieutenant. We was talkin' of this Colonel Carstairs, the Britisher who works for yore govament. Have yuh seen him lately?"

"Not for some time."

"Then he didn't cross here this mornin' with loaded pack hosses?"

"No, senor."

"Tell me, Lieutenant," drawled Hatfield, his suspicions rapidly being confirmed, "what's Carstairs look like exactly? I meant to ask yuh that afore, but we was interrupted."

"Carstairs? But you said you had seen heem. He ees not to be mistaken. A short, fat hombre, weeth a face red as a lobstaire, senor. He rides in a buckboard, for one leg ees game."

"Yeah," muttered Hatfield as the lines corrugated his bronzed forehead, "he *did* know too much!"

Determination showed about the wide mouth, the gray-green eyes darkening.

"What ees wrong, Lieutenant?" asked Moreles anxiously.

"Yuh see a tall, lean hombre, sparse dark hair, cross with a pack train this afternoon?"

MORELES called one of his men who had been in charge at the spot.

"*Si,*" the *rurale* replied to the lieutenant's question. "A Texan, senor, a trader he was, so he said. A good man who carried good liquor." The *rurale* smacked his lips.

"That was Morse, the man I want," said Hatfield. "He's got out his loot, Moreles, and is on his way."

"But, I don't savvy—"

"Morse kilt yore Colonel Carstairs, the short, fat hombre with the lobster skin, must've shot him in Mexico and in lookin' through his stuff found his papers and knowed who he was. Morse took Carstairs' place so's he could spy for Gomez in Texas, keep an eye on the doin's of the law, such as the Rangers. And then, he figgered on huntin' his treasure, too. Yuh see, this Phil Barton had changed the area where Morse hid his treasure so much that all landmarks was destroyed. The cache hole ain't big and it was deep, grass grown over it, Barton's trees hidin' the spot. Ev'ry time Morse come to probe for it, Barton's men would chase him away. It had to be a wholesale diggin' job, without any interference, 'fore they finally hit that stone-lined hole where

the treasure was hid by Morse."

"Yuh know thees Morse?"

"I do now," Hatfield said grimly. "I didn't reckernize him, for I only seen him a few minutes, five years back, when I arrested him in Laredo. Turned him over to the local sheriff and went my way. Prison changed him, too. He fooled me—with his tricks. Which way'd he go, *rurale?*"

The officer waved a hand southwest. "Toward the western sierras."

Hatfield swung the sorrel that way.

"I follow, senor," called Moreles, quickly snapping out orders.

The tall Ranger nodded, waved a hand, galloped toward the distant blue mountain peaks ahead.

"If I catch him," he muttered, "it'll be because he won't leave that gold."

Hours later, when the night had fallen over the Mexican wilds, still the powerful golden sorrel steadily kept up his pace, mile after mile, on the trail of George Morse.

The coolness of the morning was upon the dusty rider and Goldy, as Jim Hatfield again was able to check the signs of his man without dismounting as he had been forced to do during the darkness.

A layer of white alkali stuck to them. Hills rose one after another, in monotonous succession, ahead.

"It's freshenin'," muttered the Ranger, as he saw the overturned stone in the narrow, rough way, a stone kicked over by one of Morse's horses.

Moreles was coming, but Goldy had gone far out in the lead.

As they pushed up the steep side of a bushy mountain, a long bullet shrieked through the air, plopping into the dirt a yard away from the sorrel. Instantly Hatfield was ready, his Winchester drawn from the saddle boot under his long leg. He slid from his saddle and slapped Goldy. The golden horse galloped away out of range.

Squatted behind a boulder, he peered toward the ridge top. From there had come the bullet.

A STETSON top showed over the rocks. Hatfield put a bullet through it, saw it fly. A ruse, he knew—a hat held up to draw his fire. He was down immediately, as Morse fired and nicked a chunk of flint from his cover, spraying him with bits of stone and lead.

There was another big boulder a few yards to the south, and he jumped up, ran for it, made it as a slug bit off a chunk of his boot heel.

A line of scrubby pines grew up the side of the mountain, close by. That was what he was aiming for. He reached the trees and with only a crease along the back, in the flesh, to pay.

Scuttling from tree to tree, shooting as he came, he reached the ridge top and slid over. With eyes burning with red fury, Morse was down low by his laden horses.

"I knowed he'd never leave it," muttered Hatfield.

Now he could fire along the other side of the ridge. Bullets banged back and forth as the two arch-enemies shot it out. To the right of Morse's position rose the flat side of a great rock ledge. Hatfield took aim, and the Winchester slug struck this and ricocheted into the nest in which Morse lay. A curse of pain told him he had made a hit. He fired a second, pumping his bullet against the flat face of the stone.

George Morse leaped away, rolling for another spot of cover. But even as he moved Hatfield jumped, rifle to shoulder, and put two slugs into the man's squirming body. Morse rolled on, but brought up short against the stone he had hoped to reach, and lay there. The Ranger's checking bullet only twitched a corpse.

Two hours later Jim Hatfield, returning north, met Moreles and his patrol coming toward him.

Moreles stared at the body of George Morse, slung across the saddle of his black horse. The pack horses were heavily laden, and from the wrappings, disturbed by Hatfield's investigation, the gleam of gold and the green sheen of money told that the loot of the Red Raiders had finally been recovered—by the Texas Rangers. . . .

Back at the Austin headquarters, Captain McDowell listened to the tall Ranger's report.

"'Twas George Morse, then, who caused the trouble in Zapata! And yuh've cleaned it up."

"Yes, sir. Morse, Bucko Pete and Crazy Jake made that raid on Monterrey five years ago. They kilt all the Mexes who helped 'em, once it was cached. They headed for Laredo till the excitement blowed over and there I chanced to capture 'em.

"In prison, they met Big Dave Hargan, who helped 'em escape, I s'pose for a share in the loot. I reckon once they got it out, they'd've done what they did before, and hogged it all for themselves. Don't reckon they'd've give Hargan or Gomez any—not Morse. They used Hargan as a Ranger, after killin' Lew Thorn and takin' his badge. Morse couldn't quite locate his cache, 'count of the changes Phil Barton done made in the land. He had to have time and money to get that treasure. Finally he figgered a way to do it, posin' as Carstairs. There was a little shootin', Cap'n, and Morse lost."

McDowell's stern mouth softened as he grinned. "From what I've heard from Zapata," he remarked, "there *was* a little shootin'! And a lot more, Jim! Yuh reconciled Toll and Barton?"

"Yes, sir. They done invited me to the weddin' but I figgered yuh'd need me."

McDowell rose, touched the tall Ranger's shoulder—touched it lightly, as in passing.

"I do, Jim. Word's jest come in that hell's popped loose across the Pecos. If yuh think that yuh're too wore out to ride—"

An hour later, spick-and-span, the tall man on the golden sorrel rode westward from McDowell's office, the Texas Ranger carrying the Law of the Lone Star State to the far reaches of the Border.

Next Issue: SIX-GUN FURY, Book-Length Novel by JACKSON COLE

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By His Own Rope

By SAM BRANT

Author of "Forced Sale," "Rustlers Three," etc.

Berry caught the arm that held the gun, and twisted both of his foe's arms

Bill Berry Finds That a Lynch Noose Can Bring About a Rustler Showdown

BILL BERRY reined his mount with a startled curse as he spied the limp form dangling from the tree limb. There was a hangman's noose around the throat of the dead hombre and a gentle breeze fluttered the paper pinned to the front of his blue flannel shirt. He was hanging so low his feet just cleared the ground.

Berry slid out of the saddle, to advance toward the swinging corpse. Keen gray eyes in a lean, tanned face were hard, and there was plenty of strength in the rangy body clad in worn flannel shirt, levis, and scuffed cowboy boots. It was obvious, too, that the heavy Colt in the open holster on Bill Berry's right hip had seen plenty of use.

"'Warning to rustlers,'" he said, reading the message pinned to the dead man's shirt. "'Anybody found stealing stock will get the same.'"

Berry produced a jackknife and held the body of the dead man with one hand while he slashed the rope with the other. He lowered the corpse to the lush grass and stood staring down at it.

"Looks kinda young for a rustler," said Berry thoughtfully. "Weren't more than eighteen or twenty years old, poor devil."

He whirled as he heard a pounding of hoofs behind him. He stood waiting wearily, hand not far from the gun on his hip as six men brought their

mounts to a sudden halt near him.

"What's goin' on here?" demanded a heavy-set gray-haired man, apparently the leader, glaring at Berry. "Who are you?"

"Name's Berry. Saw this jasper hanging here and cut him down." His gray eyes were alert, level.

"He's lyin'," snarled a stocky, dish-faced man. "Told yuh that from the cliff I seen three jaspers hangin' a fourth gent a little while ago. And that's the same blaze-faced roan one of 'em was ridin'."

"Reckon that settles it, Hanson," snapped another of the men, looking at the leader. "If Dillon saw this feller Berry riding that roan over there, then Berry must be one of the lynchers."

"Oh—" Hanson's voice rose to a strange sort of a wail. His eyes were fixed on the corpse as he slid out of the saddle and went closer to the still form. "It—it's my boy, Jim," he muttered brokenly. "Why did they have to hang him? He was jest a kid. Little more than a button."

THREE of the other men had dismounted. One was a hawk-faced hard-eyed individual. He stood reading the message pinned to young Jim Hanson's shirt.

"Mebbe what's written there might be the truth, Jeff Hanson," growled the hawk-faced man. "There's been a heap of rustlin' goin' on around here lately."

"Damn yuh, Wilson!" Hanson whirled on the hawk-faced man, his hand on the butt of his gun, rage replacing his grief. "Yuh ain't gonna accuse my boy of bein' a rustler—not when he ain't able to defend hisself!"

"Somebody accused him 'fore I did," muttered Wilson. "Was certain enough of it to make him stretch rope. We ain't forgettin' some of our missin' stock was found on your range, Hanson."

"I won't stand for any of yuh talking about the boss thataway!" cut in the dish-faced man. "Hanson ain't no rustler, and neither was Jim! I oughta know. I been the foreman of the Bar H for two years." He turned and scowled. "I'm still wonderin' about this feller Berry."

"Wonderin' what?" demanded Berry angrily, giving him glare for glare.

"If you and them two other hombres that was with yuh didn't hang that kid and try to make out like he was a rustler 'cause he knew too much about yuh, who did?" Dillon said, and grinned wolfishly.

"I'm gonna down the jasper that killed my boy—now!" roared Hanson, hand streaking for his gun as he faced Berry.

"Jest a moment, Hanson!" snapped Berry to the owner of the Bar H spread. "A friend of yores sent me here. Feller named Carl Alison—mebbe you remember him. His initials are C. P. A."

"Huh?" For an instant the rancher appeared puzzled, then he nodded. "Oh, shore I remember Carl Alison." He jammed his gun back into leather. "If yuh're a friend of Carl's that changes the whole thing as far as I am concerned."

"Yuh mean yuh're gonna let this lynchin' rustler get away with it?" demanded Dillon. "Yuh must be crazy, Hanson! Sidin' with one of the hombres that killed yore own boy."

"That's what I think," growled Jed Wilson. "Come on men, let's be ridin'." He swung back into saddle. "Mebbe this Alison that they're talkin' about is another rustling pal of both of 'em."

FOUR men rode away, leaving Hanson and Dillon with Bill Berry and the body of the dead boy. At Hanson's request his son was buried not far from the spot where he had been hung. The foreman helped dig the shallow grave with many baleful glances at Berry, but he made no further comment until the grave was covered over with dirt. "I'm leavin' yuh, Hanson," he said then, flatly. "Mebbe there's somethin' to what folks been sayin' about you workin' with the rustlers. Specially as yuh seem right anxious to side this stranger."

"All right, Dillon," snapped Hanson. "I'm sick of yore lip, tellin' me what I should and shouldn't do all of the time. You're fired!"

"Fired, my eye! I quit!" Dillon laughed shortly as he swung into saddle and galloped away.

When Dillon had disappeared behind a clump of trees the owner of the Bar H turned to the stranger.

"That business about Carl Alison was right smart," he said. "Wasn't until yuh mentioned that Alison's initials was C. P. A. that I caught on. You're the man from the Cattlemen's Protective Association that I sent for, ain't yuh?"

"I am," said Berry. "Didn't want to say much before those other men until I sized things up around here. Looks to me like yuh're in danger, Hanson. Somebody is tryin' their best to frame you as a rustler."

"I know that," said Hanson. "All the stock that has been missin' so far has been found hidden on my range."

"Duck!" shouted Berry suddenly, before he could answer.

The old rancher dropped without asking questions. From the cliffs to the south of the little valley came the crack of a high-powered rifle. Berry dropping to the ground himself, had caught the gleam of sunlight on metal. There was a drygulcher up on the cliff!

"Lie still, Hanson," he said softly. "Let that sidewinder up there think yuh been downed."

"He'll know that he didn't get both of us with only one bullet," said Hanson without moving.

Another bullet tore into the ground dangerously close to Berry. The Cattle Association man decided the drygulcher's shooting was getting too accurate for comfort.

"Keep on lying still and he won't bother yuh," he muttered to Hanson. "He's shore yuh're dead. Me, I better head for cover."

HE raced to a boulder a short distance away, bullets whistling about him. Once he was safe behind the big rock, he scowled. The man on the cliffside was too far away for six-gun range and Berry had no rifle.

For a long time he waited, but there were no further shots from the drygulcher, or any indication he was still there. Finally, Berry deliberately stepped out into the open. Nothing happened. Jeff Hanson was still lying motionless.

"Hot as b l a z e s o u t here," the rancher complained. "How long we gonna play this game?"

"If that jasper is who I think he is he'll round up some of the ranchers around here and come back and accuse me of killin' yuh, Hanson," said Berry. "But we can't take any chances. I'm gonna make out like yuh was really dead and I was takin' yore body back to yore ranch."

"All right," Hanson agreed. "But move me around a little. I'm gettin' cramped stayin' in one position this-away."

Berry changed the position of the supposed corpse, then went to Hanson's horse and loosened the rope that was tied to the pommel of the saddle. He fastened one end of the rope around the horn so that he could pretend to tie the body so it would not fall out of the saddle.

Again the rifle cracked. The drygulcher had come back! Bill Berry fell and as he did so his right foot got tangled in the noose. Frightened, Hanson's big bay horse galloped away, dragging Berry by the foot at the end of the rope. The horse headed for the cliffs, sped through the mouth of a gulch, dragging the entangled man behind it.

Ten minutes later, a hard-eyed man carrying a rifle had just reached the bottom of one of the cliffs when a bedraggled figure landed on him like a raging wildcat. The drygulcher snarled and grabbed for his six-gun as the rifle was flung out of his reach. Berry caught the arm that held the gun, and twisted both of his foe's arms so that they were behind the drygulcher's back as he tripped him to earth.

"All right, Berry!" called a voice behind the two struggling men. "We've heard and seen enough to know that yuh got the leader of the rustlers."

BERRY glanced over his shoulder. Hanson and the three other men who had been with the ranch owner earlier had all ridden up. Hanson was mounted on Berry's roan. Both Dillon and Wilson were missing.

"Knew that this hombre must have had somethin' to do with the lynching,"

said Berry, still holding his prisoner's face to the ground. "Noticed that his rope was the only one missing off his saddle. Figgered he used it to hang the boy. Figgered, too, that young Jim must have spotted him doin' some rustlin' so he hung the kid to keep him from talkin'."

"That's Dillon, ain't it?" asked Hanson. "I been plumb certain it was him the way he's been actin'."

"No." Berry released his prisoner. "It's Tim Wilson—he's yore guilty man. Knew Dillon wasn't one of the rustlers. If he had been he'd have said he seen me hangin' young Hanson alone instead of sayin' there was two other men with me."

Dillon had ridden up hastily as he saw the gathering. He sat in the saddle listening. The foreman smiled.

"Looks to me like Wilson has hung himself by his own rope," he said to the C. P. A. man. "I shore misjudged yuh, Berry, but I was jest tryin' to protect the boss." He glanced at Hanson. "Changed my mind about quittin'."

"Yuh're hired instead of fired," said Hanson. He smiled. "Never did know a gent named Carl Alison."

JIM HATFIELD BECOMES DEATH'S DEPUTY SHERIFF IN A HELL-FOR-LEATHER BATTLE BETWEEN MINERS AND CATTLEMEN IN

SIX-GUN FURY

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NEXT ISSUE

GOOD TASTE

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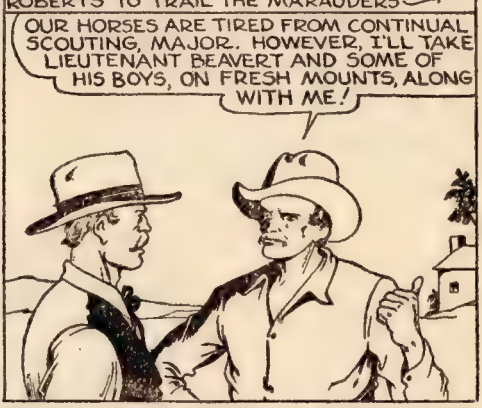
Famous TEXAS RANGERS

By Jack Ferris

LIEUTENANT RAY BEAVERT

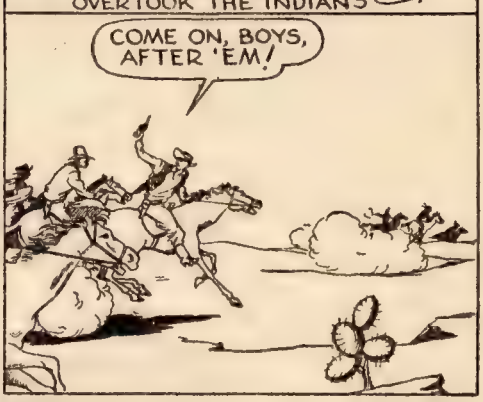
IN 1874 A BAND OF ELEVEN RENEGADE INDIANS COMMITTED A NUMBER OF DEPREDATIONS THROUGHOUT CENTRAL TEXAS, KILLING THREE MEN AND STEALING SEVENTY HORSES

MAJOR JONES ORDERED LIEUTENANT DAN ROBERTS TO TRAIL THE MARAUDERS


OUR HORSES ARE TIRED FROM CONTINUAL SCOUTING, MAJOR. HOWEVER, I'LL TAKE LIEUTENANT BEAVERT AND SOME OF HIS BOYS, ON FRESH MOUNTS, ALONG WITH ME!

ON NOV. 21 LIEUTENANTS ROBERTS AND BEAVERT STRUCK THE INDIAN TRAIL

AFTER A COUPLE OF HOURS THE RANGERS OVERTOOK THE INDIANS

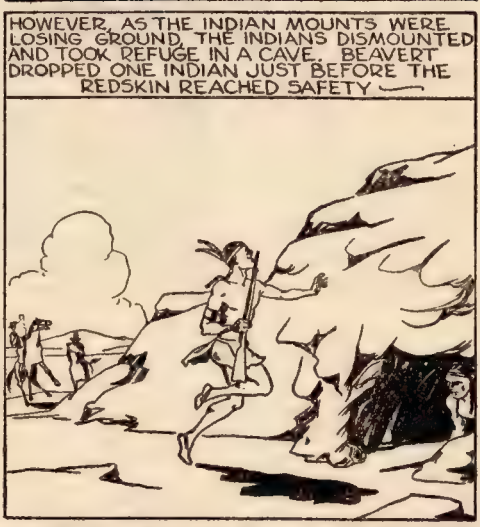


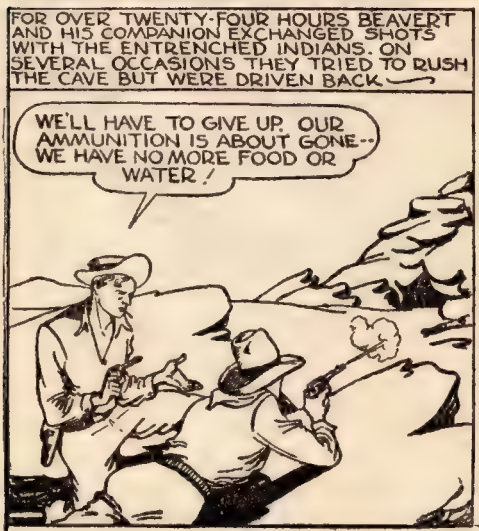
IN A RUNNING GUN-FIGHT, THE RANGERS KILLED FIVE OF THE INDIANS

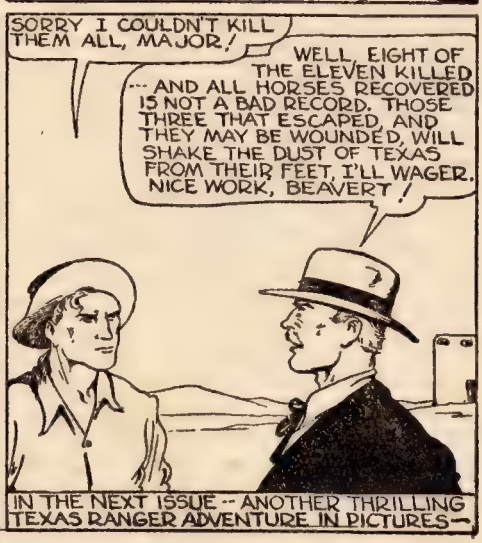
WE'VE GOT TO DROP OUT, BEAVERT, OUR HORSES ARE ALL IN!
OUR MOUNTS ARE FRESHER. WE'LL KEEP UP THE CHASE!

LIEUTENANT BEAVERT AND HIS MEN TOOK UP THE CHASE OF THE SIX REMAINING INDIANS
THERE GOES ANOTHER ONE!

THE CHASE WAS SO LONG, THAT ALL THE RANGERS EXCEPT BEAVERT AND ONE OTHER WERE FORCED TO DROP OUT
THERE'S ONLY TWO OF US AGAINST FOUR -- BUT THAT DOESN'T WORRY ME. IF OUR HORSES WILL ONLY HOLD UP!


HOWEVER, AS THE INDIAN MOUNTS WERE LOSING GROUND, THE INDIANS DISMOUNTED AND TOOK REFUGE IN A CAVE. BEAVERT DROPPED ONE INDIAN JUST BEFORE THE REDSKIN REACHED SAFETY

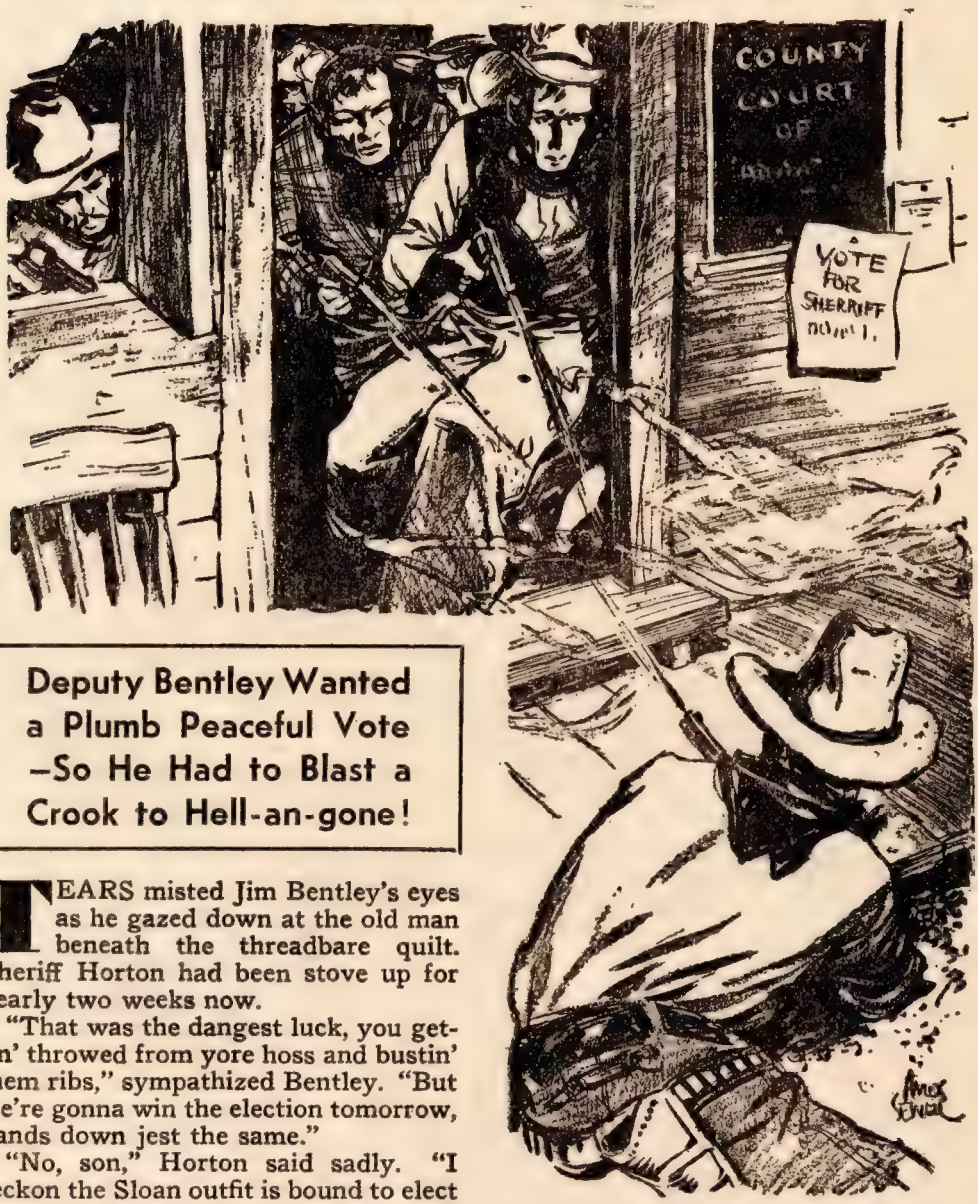

FOR OVER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEAVERT AND HIS COMPANION EXCHANGED SHOTS WITH THE ENTRENCHED INDIANS. ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THEY TRIED TO RUSH THE CAVE BUT WERE DRIVEN BACK
WE'LL HAVE TO GIVE UP. OUR AMMUNITION IS ABOUT GONE-- WE HAVE NO MORE FOOD OR WATER!


SORRY I COULDN'T KILL THEM ALL, MAJOR!
WELL, EIGHT OF THE ELEVEN KILLED --- AND ALL HORSES RECOVERED IS NOT A BAD RECORD. THOSE THREE THAT ESCAPED, AND THEY MAY BE WOUNDED, WILL SHAKE THE DUST OF TEXAS FROM THEIR FEET, I'LL WAGER. NICE WORK, BEAVERT!
IN THE NEXT ISSUE -- ANOTHER THRILLING TEXAS RANGER ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

A Quiet Election

By REX SHERRICK

Author of "Outlaw of the Pecos," "Rangeland Nerve," etc.



Without warning Wilburn and Sloan fired at the deputy

Deputy Bentley Wanted a Plumb Peaceful Vote —So He Had to Blast a Crook to Hell-an-gone!

TEARS misted Jim Bentley's eyes as he gazed down at the old man beneath the threadbare quilt. Sheriff Horton had been stove up for nearly two weeks now.

"That was the dangest luck, you gettin' throwed from yore hoss and bustin' them ribs," sympathized Bentley. "But we're gonna win the election tomorrow, hands down jest the same."

"No, son," Horton said sadly. "I reckon the Sloan outfit is bound to elect that Grady dude. There's been lots of talk about me gettin' too old for the office. I'm sorry, but it shore looks like yuh're gonna be huntin' another job."

"Yuh're talkin' through yore hat, old-timer," burst out his stalwart, black-haired young deputy fiercely. "Shucks, we're gonna reelect you. What yuh think I been doin' the last two weeks? Rollin' quirlies and twiddlin' my thumbs? I been stumpin' the county like hell. The honest folks are

gonna keep you in office. You jest lay here and mend them ribs. Leave the rest to me."

He strode quickly out of the house. Horton had called the turn, all right, and Bentley knew it. But everybody in the county knew that Jack Grady was nothing but the crooked tool of Henry Sloan, gambler, saloon owner, and big stockholder in the Cattlemen's Bank, Sloan who ran things in the town of Aberdeen.

Grady was a thin, sallow-faced jasper with a thin black mustache and snaky black eyes. He was a barman for Sloan, and Bentley had thrown him in jail more than once for brawling. It should have been a laugh when Sloan and his new faro dealer from El Paso, Ted Wilburn, cooked up a scheme to make Grady sheriff, but it wasn't because Sloan controlled half the votes in town, and if he succeeded in swinging any of the honest citizens over to his camp, there weren't enough cattlemen out on the range to reelect Clem Horton who had been sheriff for so many years that folks had lost track of them.

Bentley had canvassed the county. Now he had to see what was brewing in town. He went into Sloan's Lucky Chance saloon and ordered a small whisky at the bar, surveying the huge room.

AT a green, felt-covered table in one corner Wilburn, the new dealer, sat dealing faro for several players. His hands were long and slender and supple. He had gun-slick written all over him.

Henry Sloan halted near the thoughtful deputy.

"Hello, Jim," he greeted affably. "Ain't seen yuh lately. Yuh been outa town?"

Bentley studied the heavy features of the saloon owner. "Yeah," he said soberly. "Yeah, I been ridin' around some."

"Stumpin' for Clem Horton, I reckon?" said Sloan. "Yuh're jest wastin' yore time and gettin' saddle-galled for nothin', hombre. That old galoot's done wore out three leather bottoms to that chair in his office. He's ready for a rockin' chair now."

"We'll see tomorrow," answered Bentley in a level voice. "There's still lots of honest folks hereabouts who are satisfied with Clem Horton."

"Listen to me, young squirt," Sloan said harshly. "We're electin' a new sheriff tomorrow. And if the honest folks is so particular, they should of kicked Clem Horton out a long time ago."

Sock! Jim Bentley's fist crashed into Sloan's lips. Blood spurting, he staggered back, tripped over a spittoon, and measured his length on the floor.

Bentley heard a sharp exclamation, and glanced around. Ted Wilburn rising from his chair, a six-shooter in his slim right hand. Bentley went into a crouch as his own hands streaked for his twin guns. The draw was so fast it pinned the faro dealer helpless, his six-shooter half-raised.

"Freeze!" snapped Bentley. "One move, Wilburn, and I'll put a slug smack between yore eyes."

Silence fell like a blanket. Sloan struggled to his feet.

"Let be, Wilburn," he said between thickening lips. "This fool will get his after tomorrow when the old crook Horton gets beat at the polls."

Such reaction was, to Bentley, grimly significant. What sort of dirty game was Sloan up to? What had the man been doing while Bentley was out making a circuit of the ranches? Slowly the deputy backed to the swinging doors and stepped out into the street.

Night was falling as Jim Bentley made his way back to Sheriff Horton's house, boiling from what he had just heard.

"Listen, Sheriff," he said abruptly as he walked into the old man's bedroom. "Henry Sloan is stewin' up something about you. What's he mean by openly callin' you a crook?"

The old man's face whitened. His keen old eyes wavered, then he brought his gaze back to the indignant face of his deputy.

"Sit down, son," he muttered. "I mighta known I couldn't keep it quiet. I shoulda told you about it, instead of tryin' to duck things."

"What d'yuh mean?" demanded Bentley, going a bit weak at the pit of his stomach.

"Son," began Norton slowly, "a long time ago—before you was even born—I was doin' other things besides sheriff-in'. Down El Paso way. They—they wasn't always on the right side of the law. They was two of us — pards. One day we held up a bank and—and I killed the cashier. My pard and I got away and never rode the owlhoot trail again, but killin' a man's one crime which ain't ever outlawed."

"I see." Bentley's face was taut. "So that's really what this Ted Wilburn is doin' here."

"Yes," Horton nodded. "Sloan brought him here to force me outa office—I don't know how Sloan got wind of that old business. My pard didn't have anything to do with it, anyhow. Wilburn was a teller in that bank."

JIM BENTLEY spoke in a queer voice. "There ain't any use tryin' to hide things from me, Clem Horton. Why d'yuh pick me up when I was a ten-year-old button and bring me up to be a lawman? I've always known who yore saddle pard was. It was my father. And I know something else. Dad's dead now, so it don't matter. It wasn't you shot that bank cashier. It was my father. He—he told me."

The old sheriff's face was a mask of incredulity.

"Jim!" he cried huskily. "Yuh knowed about yore dad and me all these years—and never told me!"

"Yuh wanted to keep it secret, sir," said young Bentley with a shrug. "What good would it have done to talk? And yuh didn't kill that cashier. I'll bring yuh positive proof jest as quick as I can get to the telegraph office."

Brushing his eyes, Bentley hurried from the house. "Forgive me, Dad," he whispered. "But a white lie like that won't hurt yuh none, and it'll save yore old pardner."

The telegraph office at the railroad shack was darkened and deserted. Bentley used his key to enter the office. The sheriff had permission to use the wire whenever necessary, and Jim Bentley was a passable operator.

He rapped out a call to El Paso, and when he got it, tapped out rapid instructions which soon had that city's police department boiling over in excitement. It was, in effect, a posthumous confession that Tom Bentley and not Clem Horton had killed the cashier of the Merchants' Bank twenty-five years previous, and an urgent request for El Paso to wire that news back to Sheriff Horton as quickly as possible.

As he finished, Bentley heard a noise at the window of the telegraph shack. He whirled, and in the yellow light of the lamp a knife gleamed as it sped to nick his cheek. He fired, hand still on the key. There was a howl of pain and rage as the glass shattered.

By the time Bentley reached the outside, however, the would-be drygulcher was gone. . . .

Voting at the county courthouse on election day was slow during the morning, and Bentley spent his time going from the jail office to the depot, but there was no word from El Paso.

When the ranchers began to ride in to cast their votes business picked up. Bentley saw Sloan and Wilburn with a couple of ugly-looking housemen enter the polling place where the gambler took charge of the voting. Uttering an angry exclamation, Bentley had started to interfere, to prevent any crookedness when he saw the station agent running along the street, carrying a fluttering paper.

Bentley rushed to meet him.

"Message from El Paso," yelped the agent, his eyes popping. "I'll swear, Jim, I never got such a shock—"

"Give it here," snapped Bentley, grabbing the sheet and reading.

His own eyes bulged and his jaw dropped. With a shout, he headed for the courthouse where Sloan was haranguing the voters.

Before he could get out a word, though, Sloan and Wilburn appeared in the doorway, guns in hand. Without warning both of them fired. Struck in the thigh, Bentley crumpled to the dusty street.

But both his guns were out as he fell. Sloan, crowding behind Wilburn, shot

the left-hand gun out of Bentley's hand. Grimly, knowing this was showdown, the deputy let Wilburn have a slug—low.

The fellow grunted, jerked, and sagged down across the threshold. Bentley's gun leaped to cover Sloan, and both men fired at once. A streak of fire shot across the deputy's head just as he saw the ugly sallow face of Jack Grady peering at him out of the window, a knife in one hand, the other bandaged. So Grady had been the drygulcher at the telegraph office! Bentley tried to raise his gun once more, but failed. He heard a gun roar, then pitched forward on his face.

SHERIFF HORTON came limping along the dusty street, hastily stuffing his nightshirt into his trousers, and holding a still smoking rifle.

"That settles that polecat Grady!" he grunted. "Damn sneak! Jim, son, are yuh bad hurt?"

Sloan was dead, and Ted Wilburn was writhing his life away. Others had corraled and disarmed Sloan's henchmen.

"My past has done caught up with me," shouted the sheriff, "but, by grabs, I ain't leavin' any dirty buzzards to take over my job—thanks to Jim!"

Bentley sat up. He grinned weakly.

"I told yuh I was gonna see yuh reelected, and I don't aim to have been shot up for nothin'." he said. "Sheriff, neither you nor my dad killed that bank cashier. I just got a telegram that says Ted Wilburn shot the cashier in the back after you two old coyotes ran off. They've been huntin' for Wilburn ever since. Now let's have our usual quiet election."

NEXT ISSUE

RATTLESNAKE RANGE

A Story of Gold Lure by HAPSBURG LIEBE

I MAKE SURE YOU GET A BIG, BIG BOTTLE
PEPSI-COLA
REFRESHING HEALTHFUL
A SPARKLING DELICIOUS BEVERAGE
FAMOUS FOR OVER 30 YEARS
5¢
12 OZ. BOTTLE
I MAKE SURE THE FLAVOR HITS THE SPOT

Long Sam Collects

By LEE BOND

Author of "Long Sam Pays with Lead," "Wine and Water," etc.

He whirled on the masked man, and again the outlaw's guns beat blazing thunder into the wind and rain

What's a Wound or a Pursuing Deputy to Littlejohn—When His Help Is Needed?

WITH a day old bullet hole through his leg, a Texas rain squall beating him in the face, a deputy U. S. marshal trailing him, and no food for twenty-four hours, Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, was in about the worst humor a man could be in when he rode up into the hill pass.

The unusually tall outlaw rode slumped forward, shivering from the gnawing pain of the bullet wound in his left thigh. His bony-jawed face was a sickly white color from suffering and hunger.

The slicker which hung draped over his lanky body leaked in a dozen places, and Long Sam was wet to the skin. He had hoped that the stone walls of the pass would break some of the storm's fury, give him and his horse a few mo-

ments rest. But the wind and rain came straight into the defile, and seemed to gather energy between the walls, beat at man and horse with renewed force.

Long Sam cursed through blue lips, and tried to peer out into the wall of water which gushed down from the leaden sky.

His smoke colored eyes were bloodshot, their lids swollen from lack of rest. He knew that he could not sit a saddle many more hours, just as he knew that the tough old strawberry roan he straddled could not go many more miles without rest and feed.

"Maybe this is the last ride, Sleeper," Littlejohn muttered into the wind and rain, clumsily stroking the ugly roan's neck as he talked.

Sleeper's great splayed hoofs made sodden sounds in the wet trail. The hammer-head lifted, the pin-ears cocked back to catch the sound of the master's voice.

Rat-tailed and sorry looking, that big-hoofed roan. But every badge man in Texas cussed the bronc, and swore that it could make more speed and stand more traveling without rest than any other horse in the country. And Long Sam Littlejohn was thinking of the roan now instead of himself as he rode into the pass.

FAR down the slopes beyond the pass lay the mysterious country of pear and mesquite thickets. Down there, Long Sam Littlejohn would be safe from Deputy Joe Fry, or any other badge man for that matter.

Littlejohn knew that thorn armoured land of impenetrable thickets as few men knew it. Once into that country of twisting trails and blind lands, the outlaw could confuse the deputy U. S. marshal, Joe Fry, who rode after him, and hole up somewhere for a few hours of much needed rest.

But Sleeper could never make those thickets. Littlejohn knew that when he felt the tough roan stagger there in the steep pass.

The outlaw cursed in heartfelt sympathy, pulled back on wet reins until Sleeper slowed to a walk.

"Damned if I'll ride yuh dead, ol' feller," the gaunt man growled. "I'll hole up at yonder end of this pass and swap some gun lead with Joe Fry before I'll—what the hell!"

Littlejohn's last three words were a strident yell as his tall figure went sidewise out of the saddle. Somewhere in the swirling mists of wind-driven rain ahead of him a gun had blasted loudly.

Long Sam moaned in agony when he hit the muddy earth on ploughing boot heels, for the shock of the landing was like a red-hot iron being pushed through that bullet hole in his thigh.

But dazed and sick as he was, Long Sam clawed open the hooks on the front of his leaky slicker, and clamped numbed hands over the butts of two .45s that rode his thighs in hand-tooled black holsters.

He limped into the lee of an upslanted boulder beside the trail, and stood there crouched and tense for long minutes, smoky eyes straining vainly against the gray pall of mist and rain which howled through the pass.

With two thousand dollars bounty posted for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam had naturally figured that some badge man or bounty hunting citizen had taken a shot at him. But no bullet had come even close to him, for he could have heard it striking the stone pass wall despite the storm's roar. And there had been only one shot. Bounty hunter or officer would not have stopped at that.

Littlejohn had been exposed long enough for anyone wanting to sling lead at him to have turned loose a good many slugs. But there was someone further along the pass, hidden from Littlejohn's probing and weary eyes by the rain.

Sleeper, the ugly roan horse, was standing with slope-hips lowered in a half crouch. The roan's eyes were rolling, and his ears were flattened. Sleeper mistrusted humans almost as thoroughly as did his master, and it was plain to Littlejohn now that the horse caught man-scent on the gusting wind.

"Easy, boy," the outlaw soothed the roan. "Whoever it is yuh smell ain't huntin' us, or they'd have been dustin' my south end with lead when I headed for this boulder. Steady, hoss!"

SLEEPER was suddenly whirling, snorting uneasily. Long Sam plunged out from behind the up-slanted boulder, snatched at the roan's swaying reins.

The outlaw cursed the searing pain of his wounded thigh, bony face drawn into bitter lines as he caught the roan and pulled himself up into the saddle. For in whirling Sleeper had cocked pointed ears towards the back-trail, and Littlejohn was reminded of Deputy Joe Fry.

"So that derby wearin' little son is gettin' close, is he, Sleeper?" the outlaw growled. "Well, we know damned well Fry will blast us with lead if he gets the chance, so it looks like we'll have to take a look at yonder end of the pass."

Muttering more to keep up his own sagging spirit than anything else, Littlejohn turned the roan, rode slowly on along the pass, body hunched to meet the thrust of rain and wind. But he did not hook his slicker despite the fact that what few dry patches had remained on his somber black clothing were swiftly being soaked.

The pass made a sharp turn just before opening out on the south slopes, and Long Sam slowed his roan to a cautious walk as he neared the turn. But there was no sound, and instead of dismounting, peering around the shoulder of stone as good judgment dictated, the outlaw rode around the rock.

A big Concord stage coach and four horses were halted, facing Littlejohn. A squatty looking gent up on the boot was reaching down, grasping the limp shoulders of an hombre who was being lifted up towards the driver by a tall jigger who wore a yellow slicker and a clear beaver Stetson that showed its newness despite the fact that it was rain soaked.

Long Sam Littlejohn knew that the man being lifted up from the trail was dead. He could see the set, white face when the fellow's head rolled, and could see blood that even the beating rain could not hide gushing from the limp fellow's forehead. There was a saddled horse standing beside the stage, and a suspiciously bulky gunny sack had been tied behind the cantle of the saddle on that waiting horse.

Long Sam saw those things in the few seconds it took him to tighten reins and wish mightily that he had not ridden so boldly around the shoulder of sandstone. But Littlejohn's regrets were short lived.

The blocky gent up on the boot let go the dead man's arms, bawled profanely, and watched a Winchester which leaned close by.

The tall fellow in the trail spun, dropping the dead man to claw frantically at slicker front.

Long Sam saw then that the slicker clad man was masked, and that the fellow was backing towards that waiting horse. The stage driver had his Winchester up now, slapping at the hammer with hooked thumb as he raised the gun to shoulder.

Long Sam was humming a doleful tune through strong teeth, and those who knew the gaunt outlaw passably well claimed that hell was due to pop when Long Sam Littlejohn hummed that funeral tune.

"Somethin' crooked here, Sleeper," he muttered, and the humming grew louder as his words ended.

LONG SAM'S hands seemed only to flutter in an uncertain movement instead of actually dipping down, then up. But from the level of his waistline twin jets of burning powder lashed out past Sleeper's flattened ears, and the guard up on the stage boot yelled bloody murder when the stage team lunged wildly forward. The vehicle careened violently, and the driver lost his rifle in a frantic grab for slipping reins.

Long Sam shunted Sleeper aside as the teams and stage bore down upon him, grinning coldly as he watched the white faced driver brace sturdy legs and begin taking the slack out of those reins he'd grabbed. But that masked hellion had his guns free now, and Long Sam felt a slug rip through the fluttering slicker below his right armpit.

He whirled on the masked man, and again the outlaw's guns beat blazing thunder into the roaring wind and rain.

The masked fellow dropped smoking guns, clamped right hand to left shoulder, and whirled on unsteady legs, aim-

ing to make for the sorrel that had stood beside the stage. But the shooting, and the mad clatter of the stage's flight, had spooked the sorrel.

The masked hombre squalled an oath at sight of his mount hightailing into a thicket a hundred yards away, and tried frantically to dash after the fleeing animal. But Long Sam's right hand gun bellowed, and a fistful of muddy earth sprayed up beside the wounded hombre's churning boots.

"Hold it, feller!" the outlaw ordered. "I aim to find out howcome yuh and that stage driver are so chummy. Yore mask, and what I seen tied behind yore saddle, shore hints that maybe there's a fly in the buttermilk. Stand hitched, or—"

The masked man was showing no disposition to stand hitched, as Littlejohn had ordered. Instead, the fellow changed courses, dived into the brush choked head of a ravine which twisted down the slope towards big moss covered oaks.

But Long Sam suddenly forgot the fleeing man. To his ears came the heavy sound of skidding wheels, the cursing of the stage driver and the uneasy snort of the frightened team.

"Go easy, driver!" a voice knifed the wind's howling. "Put that gun up. I'm Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal. What the hell is happenin' around here, anyhow. I heard—"

Long Sam heard, too. He'd heard enough to tell him that it was time he got out of there. He struck Sleeper's gaunt flanks with dull rowels, and turned the big roan off towards the thickets where the sorrel had vanished.

"If I can catch that sorrel, Sleeper, I'll turn yuh loose to rest," the outlaw muttered. "And if I don't catch that fresh sorrel, Joe Fry will likely have me jail house bound inside of another hour."

THE leggy, speedy looking sorrel was fighting reins that had tangled in a stout bush when Long Sam Littlejohn found the animal. He swung in towards the rearing, wild-eyed gelding, talking to it. The horse was young and green, and the shooting had spooked it plenty. But Long Sam got hold of the cheek strap nearest him, and the gelding calmed down after another plunge or two.

Long Sam saw the Circle N brand on the sorrel's left hip, and his smoky eyes burned when he felt of the gunny sack package behind the cantle of the sorrel's saddle. He loosened buckskin thongs, lifted the package down. He tied the trembling sorrel solidly to a branch, then carried the heavy package to a little clearing.

Long Sam up-ended the sack, and began humming that doleful tune again when an iron box thudded heavily upon the turf. It was a strong-box such as most stage outfits used for the transporting of valuables. Long Sam shook it, but could hear no tell-tale jingle of gold or silver money. He scowled down at the box, and sat hunkered on his heels for a moment, listening.

The roar of the wind in the brush and trees about him would have drowned out the sound of an approaching army, he decided. But Deputy Joe Fry would be busy back there with that stage driver for a while, anyhow. They would have to load the dead man, and the state driver would have to tell Fry some tall tale about the holdup.

"That driver, and the masked feller, were shore too friendly," Littlejohn mused, staring moodily down at the strong-box. "Way I figger the thing is that the masked gent killed the shotgun guard, which would be the dead hombre back yonder. The stage driver and that masked hellion are in cahoots on the deal. But why? This box don't seem to have any hard money in it."

Long Sam prodded the box, lifted it, shook it again. But he could hear nothing. And the box was light.

"The stage or express company would be responsible for whatever valuables this box held," the outlaw grumbled. "But I can't go waltzin' up to a stage outfit or a Wells Fargo depot and hand the thing over."

Long Sam put the box down, tugging thoughtfully at the rather cheap lock which held it shut. He drew a gun, slid the blued pistol barrel through the lock's looped tongue, and twisted sharply. The lock popped open, and Long Sam holstered his .45. He

opened the strong-box then, and suddenly his smoky eyes widened. The box held valuables, all right, for it was packed with neatly tied packets of currency.

Littlejohn whistled, lifted a packet of the money, and riffled the ends of the bills, counting rapidly. A couple of minutes later he stood erect, an uneasy look on his gaunt face as he hastily stuffed the four tied packets of currency inside his soggy black sateen shirt front.

"Three thousand dollars!" he breathed. "And if I'm caught with the stuff, nobody would ever believe that I aimed to try my damnedest to find the money's rightful owner and turn the stuff over to said owner."

THE outlaw glanced back towards the pass, but could see no sign of Deputy Fry as yet. Long Sam limped to Sleeper, flung the reins up over the roan's head, then turned to the leggy sorrel. He untied the sorrel, swung up into the saddle, and grinned wearily at Sleeper's disapproving snort.

"Quit bellyachin', yuh ol' sinner," Littlejohn chuckled. "Yuh ought to be glad I'm givin' yuh a rest. If Fry crowds us, I'll strip the gear off yuh so's yuh can shift for yoreself a spell. But if he don't crowd us I reckon yuh can tag along."

Sleeper followed when Long Sam turned the sorrel and rode off through the thickets. Free of the outlaw's weight now, the roan stepped out more strongly than it had in a good many hours.

But Long Sam held the sorrel down to an easy pace, knowing that the faithful roan could not stand a hard trip even as nearly unburdened as it was. Long Sam discovered that holding the sorrel in was no easy job, and realized that the horse was trying to bear south with him.

"Tryin' to head for home, eh?" the owlhooter muttered. "Well, now, maybe that ain't a bad idea, hoss. If I could get a look at that master of yores when he wasn't masked, maybe it'd help me figger out this stage robbery business."

Littlejohn let the sorrel take the course it obviously wanted to take, but held the horse in to a walk, riding through every patch of brush and over every rocky strip of ground his tired eyes could find. The storm let up within a half hour, and another half hour saw the warm Texas sun reaching down through swiftly thinning clouds.

Long Sam had covered several miles, and knew that his sign was fairly well fogged. He removed his slicker when the sun came out, welcoming the warmth. But as his clothing dried and the chill left his body sleepiness came, and he found himself dozing in the saddle more than once. Long Sam was glad when he finally sighted the little log ranch house that sat at the base of the hills.

The sorrel whinnied, tried to bolt down the last wooded slope. But Littlejohn tightened the reins, halting the horse completely. He sat for several minutes, studying the house and corrals below him.

Beyond the little ranch lay the thickets of pear, mesquite and tornillo, a wild, harsh country of dim trails and blind lanes. But that wicked country was friendly to men like Littlejohn, and his heavy lidded eye kindled when he realized that the safety of those thorny jungles lay so close.

Long Sam dismounted, looped tied reins up over the sorrel's neck, and watched it bolt down the slope, whinnying eagerly. The faithful Sleeper came up to muzzle Littlejohn's shoulder, and the outlaw stroked the ugly roan's neck as he stood gazing down the slope.

The sorrel was out of the timber now, thundering towards the little house. It halted at the corral behind the house, but as the horse had galloped past, the back door opened, and a man stepped out. The follow turned, gesturing excitedly as he talked to someone just inside the door. Then a woman came out, and the two of them hurried down the muddy path to the corral. They petted the sorrel, walked around it, looking it over.

LONG SAM could see their hands going over the horse, and watched them unsaddle it finally, turn it into a

corral. The man shook his head as deeply puzzled about something, and the woman followed him as he carried saddle, blanket and bridle to a little shed. Then they were going back to the house, and Long Sam was turning, reaching for horn and stirrup when Sleeper snorted, shied uneasily.

The roan's head swung, and his ears cocked towards a clump of timber up the slope a few rods. Long Sam tensed, and his big hands started towards gun butts as his heavy lidded eyes focused on the clump of young oak trees up the slope. But the outlaw's hands never completed that down motion. A harsh voice flung out of the oaks up the hill, and Long Sam stood as if frozen in his tracks, cursing wearily through locked teeth.

"Jist hold that pose, long feller!" the voice crackled. "I dunno who yuh are, but yuh've struck that snoot o' yores into another feller's business. Stand steady ontil I kin read yore brand."

Long Sam Littlejohn was humming softly through his teeth, smoky eyes studying the stubby, thick-chested man who had come out of the oak grove. The stubby gent bow-legged down the slope, a Winchester trained from hip level. The rifleman's wind-burned face was scowling, and his puckered blue eyes were stormy as he halted a yard away.

Long Sam continued humming, and kept his head tilted down until the black Stetson he wore shielded most of his features from those hard blue eyes of the man before him.

"Quit hummin' that damn funeral tune an' start talkin'," the stubby man snapped. "I seen yuh ride that sorrel down here, then turn the bronc loose to go on to Jim Nash's place, yonder. Who are yuh, an' where's Dick Forbin?"

Long Sam had never heard of a gent called Dick Forbin. But he was suddenly guessing that Dick Forbin would be the name of that masked jigger he had shoulder-shot up in the pass where the stage had been held up.

"Yuh a friend of Dick's?" he asked, but did not raise his head.

He was watching the short man from beneath that black hatbrim, however. He saw the fellow's face crimson, and saw the stubby hands grip the rifle threateningly.

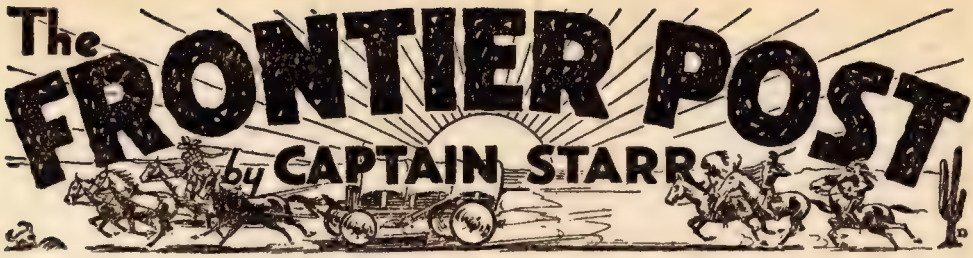
"Quit stallin', an' tell me how yuh happened to be ridin' Jim Nash's sorrel," the rifleman growled.

"Maybe Forbin went on yonder to Nash's place," Long Sam stalled desperately.

"Are yuh crazy?" the man with the rifle blurted. "Dick or any o' us other Lazy Q riders wouldn't show ourselves around Nash's Circle N. If we did, he'd tumble that—Say, quit throwin' me off the track an' tell me how yuh happened to ride Jim Nash's pet sorrel here."

"I don't know yuh, and don't know whether yuh've got any business knowin' how I happened to ride that sorrel or not," Littlejohn snorted. "But just suppose I come across Dick Forbin when he needed help. Mind now, I ain't admittin' a thing. But *suppose* Forbin was attendin' to a certain chore, when things went wrong and he got bullet crippled. Maybe he had to take

(Continued on page 107)



WELL, gals and galluses, I figured that I knowed my Texas, old and and new. But right now I'm making a pasear through a part I never saw much of. And a part that not many folks do. If I was to up and ask you, what is the wildest seacoast in United States, like as not most o' you would say Maine. Or Washington, or the Carolinas, or lower Florida.

No sir, folks! If you crave to see beaches and bays and shore wilderness absolutely untouched and unchanged in the four centuries since white men came pilgrimating, come to Texas. For more'n four hundred miles, from Port Arthur on the Louisiana boundary, to Brownsville, at the mouth of the Rio Grande, there stretches the most primitive, uninhabited region in all United States.

Salty Cowpunchers

Me, I didn't travel the broad, smooth highway that connects Beaumont, Houston, Victoria and the lower Rio Grande Valley. I headed down into the tidewater country, where cowpunchers are half-sailor. Yes, sir, where they sure enough use boats to herd cattle! I saw a part o' Texas that is the same as when the Rangers rode it in the Fifties.

Of coursé, there's some good-sized towns. Plumb modern, brisk and prosperous ones, some o' them bein' world seaports, such as Galveston and Corpus Christi. And smaller resorts places, like Freeport, Palacios, Rockport and Port Isabel. But for the most part, outside where the Gulf rolls onto the bright, white sand o' the island barrier, the world belongs to Nature as far as the eye can reach.

Skeletons of Ships

Practically the whole coast is protected by this long island strip. Padre Island is the biggest. It's about one hundred miles long, and from a few yards to one mile across. Along it at places are rusted, shell-encrusted wrecks, some o' them bein' the skeletons o' ships ravaged by early-day pirates.

There's immense stretches where I plumb doubt man ever set foot. Places where for days you could watch without sighting a sail, or steamer smoke. Just wheeling gulls, soaring pelicans by the thousands, ducks, geese and shorebirds in endless variety. A lavish wilderness, where the oyster boats don't come, where only the birds harvest the tasty Gulf shrimp, and where tarpon leap and dolphin play.

It's an all-year climate, that turns semi-tropical as you get down towards the Rio Grande Valley. There's thickets that even the half-wild cattle don't explore, where the mesquite deer graze, and the javelinas or wild hogs roam, and ocelot cats, and you see one of the strangest critters on this continent, the armadillo out feasting on a ant-hill.

Some day, mebbe there'll be hot dog stands and bright umbrellas and bathin' beauties along this wild, free, sunny strand, just like on the civilized coasts. Through the passes or channels that separate the islands are buoys and lighthouses, and you see tankers putting to sea, or freighters loaded with Texas products. But there's only seven or eight such passes in that 400-mile stretch o' double coastline. The rest is a story-book land, the kind of shore that Crusoe ruled, a region you see in your dreams of adventure, and never thought existed no more.

Yes, sir, folks, this here's a Texas that a heap o' Texans don't know.

Herding Cattle in Boats

Now I reckon you're mighty curious to know how punchers can herd cattle in boats.

Well, a look at the map might help you to understand. The biggest cattle ranch in the world, the celebrated King Ranch, is just one o' many immense holdings that fronts on this vast shore. It is indented by inlets and bays and bayous and marshes that form many thousands o' miles o' shoreline.

There'll be a peninsula, where the grass is rich and tall, and there's great cypress trees, and moss-hung oaks. If the punchers had to follow the shoreline, it'd take 'em days o' riding in some cases to reach these strange ranges. So they just ride down to a hidden boat landing, strip saddle and gear offen their hosses, cross those water stretches, and catch up hosses which they keep in a fenced pasture on the yonder side!

Yes, sir, navigatin' cowboys, these are. They pull a oar as good as they whirl a throw-rope.

Human Pelicans

You'll also observe on your map that Texas dips down as far south as Florida's mainland, and when you travel the roads linking the coast towns you cross over long causeways, miles of 'em, a good deal the same as the one that connects Key West with the Florida peninsula.

There's always a flock o' citizens out with

long cane poles, hoisting theirselves a fish dinner out o' the tide flow. These here human pelicans, they claim Texas fishing can't be beat. There's more varieties than a man can name, including a species o' salt water pike which ain't found elsewhere, and there's sailfish as long as a rowboat. It's one place where there's more fish than fishermen.

Easy Duck Hunting

It's purty safe to say that the easiest duck hunting in United States is along these inlets. Bands o' geese, also, in migratin' season, which feed on the black sod prairies back from the water, on a small, red berry. They claim this wild berry gives the birds a flavor unlike anything you ever before tasted.

The Texas mesquite deer is small, the buck weighing around 100 pounds, and with a not very big horn spread, because he lives his life in dense chaparral. The usual method o' hunting is from saddle. You don't see 'em much in ordinary travel, because they stay to cover. High-class hunting is had ten or twenty miles outside good-sized towns, which proves that they're plentiful.

Oldtime Cattle Trails

Down in lower Rio Grande Valley is the place where the oldtime famous cattle trails started. The Chisholm Trail, and the Dodge Trail which branched off from it and crossed into Oklahoma in the vicinity o' Wichita Falls. You'll meet old-timers who remember the big trail drives, and can show you the guns they packed in those days. The buzzards and coyotes followed the herds.

Their human relatives, the road agents and rustlers and tinhorn gamblers, followed the drovers. That was where the Texas Rangers came in.

They followed the renegades, sometimes deep down into Mexico, without botherin' about any fancy opinions on international law. This is the Sam Bass country, where honest men same as crooks notched their gunstocks to keep record of their contributions to justice.

Reminders of Stage Roads

Traces o' the old Chisholm Trail are purty well vanished, but in places like gully crossings you can still observe dim remainders o' the old stage roads that connected the lower Rio with the outside world.

At Brownsville two rickety bridges span the Rio, connecting the American town with Matamoras, Mexico. Folks, I've been in every border port, along the entire Mexican boundary, from Tijuana to the Gulf. None o' them do credit to the fine, progressive cities down in up-and-coming Mexico. But of them all, Matamoras is worth a look-see as the filthiest and most degraded place o' human habitation on this here continent. Places like Matamoras create a plumb false impression o' what real Mexico is like.

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 103)

Texas border towns looked like this in the early days. That is, the narrow streets was mud wallows in wet weather, and shin-deep dust in dry weather. The townspeople tried to assert their superiority to their environment by dressin' up and pickin' their way through the mess. Men in frock coats and frills, with top hats and canes. The wimmen in flounces and ostrich plume hats.

But it wasn't long before the Tejanos turned their personal vanity into civic pride. They got into work clothes, rolled up their sleeves, and sure did proceed to straighten things up. There's lower Rio towns nowadays as purty as a colored postal card. Take the town o' Weslaco. As you enter, there's a big arch that has the enterprisin' slogan, "The Town That Lifted Its Face."

This sort o' fancyin' up has made the lower Rio Valley a rival with California and Florida for winter tourists, and they pilgrimate down there in increasin' flocks each season.

Mexican Bargains

Up the valley some 200 miles from the Gulf of Laredo, from where a fine, modern-paved highway heads clean down to Mexico City and beyond.

This here International Highway, which they figure will extend some day on into South America has made Laredo the most important border port. Americans go through in droves.

These days, with the Mexican peso worth under 20 cents, you get almost six pesos for one American dollar, and the *turistas* came back loaded down with attractive bargains in Mexican handicraft, such as serapes, rugs, earthenware, decorative tile and leather goods.

America's First Hosses

But it's the double coastline o' Texas that lures the gals and galluses who've got a taste for adventure, just as it lured the Spanish galleons a few hundred years back. With their tin helmets and long hatchet spears, the *conquistadores* must o' had a fine time exploratin' this shore.

Along here is where the first hosses was brung to America. Some got loose. The ultimate result was the western mustang, the toughest, wiliest, buckingest critter in the shape o' hossflesh. They bred and multiplied and roamed the plains on up to the Canada prairies. They changed the living habits o' the Indians, for most o' the central tribes learned to break these broncs and go places on 'em.

If there existed some historical records from these times, it could prob'ly be shown that the coming o' the hoss stirred up a heap o' trouble. Just as always happens when mankind gets hold o' some power greater than his own frail sinews. The hoss Indians roamed farther, claimed more widespread hunting grounds, and warred with other tribes to nail down their claims.

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

The hoss became the most coveted spoils o' war. In later times, hoss stealing got to be considered about the lowest-down crime. But among the Indians, it was a valorous pursuit, like war conquests are in this here so-called civilization nowadays.

Besides bein' a primitive military necessity, the hoss was handy in all sorts o' peacetime activity. The hoss Indian got rich on buffalo. Instead o' livin' in permanent villages, which were ravaged by filth-produced epidemic, the hoss Indian picked up and moved whenever the notion hit him.

This helped the hoss tribes to grow stronger warriors. They raided the pueblos and robbed their granaries. The world was theirs for the pickin', until along came men like the Rangers, and the Colt six-gun.

The Caddos

In the upper right-hand corner o' Texas lived a peaceful, industrious and numerous tribe called the Caddos.

They built houses and cultivated crops and developed a purty high-class culture. But the Kiowas and Comanches went in for war ponies instead o' mud architecture and pushin' wooden plows. Between hunting expeditions, they'd go clean up on the Caddos.

Later, the Caddos submitted to the white man and were bunched up on reservations while the fighting tribes still roamed. The Caddos, they're practically extinct now. I reckon if we tried to draw a comparison, it might prove that it don't pay to be too plumb peaceable. Not so long as there's rascals who covet the fruits o' honest men's toil and try to cover up their wholesale thievery in the disguise o' patriotic glory.

The Fruits of Conquest

There's more to the study o' history than remembering difficult dates. It's mighty useful to size up what men did in the past, and learn what came of it. Out of it all, folks, I reached one definite conclusion. That is, the fruits o' conquest are as hard to hold onto as the easy-come dollar.

Here in Texas, the *conquistadores* not only lost out in the long run, but they didn't so much as leave their mark on the landscape. They came, they saw, they conquered. Then finally the people they conquered rose up and knocked 'em out o' their socks.

If this is the correct view o' life, there's solid satisfaction in observing that military posts are prominent features along the Texas coast, especially aviation fields. Right now, they're increasing in numbers and importance.

A new naval air station like Pensacola is coming as soon as Galveston and Houston get done squabbling over which one gets it. Already, the Army's "West Point of the Air" is doing business at San Antonio.

They're producing a Jim Hatfield breed

(Concluded on page 106)

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(Concluded from page 105)

that rides sunbeam trails. I reckon we won't be took like the Caddos.

History on the Hoof

There's many a story-book land that's changed and grown over so that you're disappointed when you finally see the place you imagined was so glamorous. But there's still enough o' the old mixed in with the new in Texas that it's a larrupin' good place to study history on the hoof.

And I'm fixin' to ask Jackson Cole to send his Ranger-hero, Jim Hatfield, down into the land o' the seagoing cowboys in one o' his rip-r'arin' novels soon!

How about it, gals and galluses?

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LONG SAM COLLECTS

(Continued from page 101)

to the brush on foot, and needed somebody to ride that sorrel for him. I ain't sayin'—"

"Dick got drilled?" the stubby man cut in wildly. "Say, feller, git the slack out o' yore tongue an' talk sense. How'd Dick git shot up?"

LONG SAM forced a whine into his voice.

"For all I know, yuh're maybe a badge toter, tryin' to pump me. Dick never—"

"I'm Cleve Moby, an' I've rode fer Dick ever since he's ramrodded Buck Gilford's Lazy Q," the short fellow introduced himself swiftly. "Now will yuh quit beatin' around the bush an' talk sense? Me, a badge toter! That's rich, cowboy. I was waitin' here with Dick's hoss, so's him an' me could hightail when Jim Nash's sorrel was turned loose to lay a plain trail to that damned Nash's door. What happened to Dick?"

"Why didn't yuh tell me who yuh was instead of actin' ornery, Moby?" Long Sam sighed. "Shore, I reckoned yuh was the man who'd be waitin' here with Dick's hoss. But yuh didn't mention yore name, and I didn't dare ask questions."

"What happened to Dick?" Moby repeated angrily. "I still don't know whether yuh're stallin' or not, so talk up."

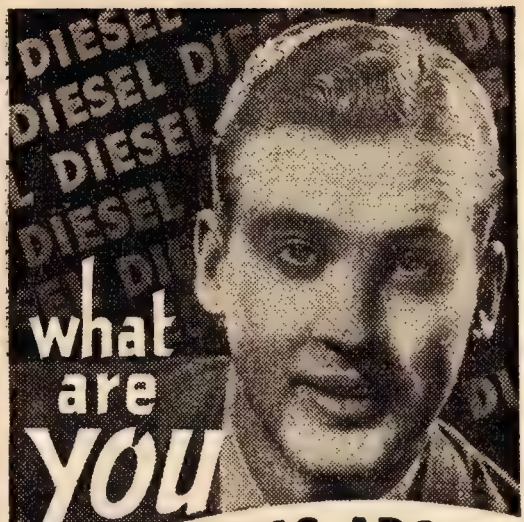
"Dick stuck up the stage, and plugged the shotgun guard." Long Sam held his breath after that plunge.

But Moby only nodded jerkily, leaned eagerly forward, lowering the rifle muzzle for the first time.

"Shore, that was part of the plan," he snapped. "Dick was to beef Frank Julian, the shotgun guard, so's the charge agin Jim Nash would be murder as well as robbery. But what went wrong?"

"A feller rode up, right smack in the middle of things," Long Sam reported truthfully. "Dick and the stage driver both got hostile, and the gent who rode up on 'em had to sling some lead. The

(Continued on page 108)



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(Continued from page 107)

feller shot under the stage teams, and made the broncs stampede, which put the driver out of the fight, since he had to tool them teams through the pass. Dick Forbin went for his guns, and the gent who had happened into the pass at the wrong time drilled Dick."

"Good lord!" Cleve Moby croaked. "I'll have to hightail it, head Gilford off before he fetches the sheriff out here, an' tell him what has went wrong. Is Dick dead, captured, or what?"

Long Sam chuckled. "I reckon he's runnin' around in the brush nursin' a sore shoulder. I've got the money that was in the strong-box, though."

"Then hand it over," Moby demanded. "Gilford sent the money out on the stage as part o' the frame-up, of course. He owns the stage line, an' guarantees anything the stages haul. So pass over the money an' I'll take it back to the boss. An' if yuh happen to know the sidewinder who horned into that deal up there, name him. The Lazy Q will shut him up. How long have yuh knowed Dick Forbin?"

"Never heard of the son until yuh called his name," Long Sam drawled, and began humming that mournful tune as he lifted his head, shoved the black Stetson far back on his yellow hair.

Cleve Moby yelped a hoarse oath, tried to lift the rifle. But Long Sam's right hand bounced up, and Cleve Moby found himself staring into the business end of a cocked six-gun.

"Drop the rifle, runt, or I'll drop you," Long Sam ordered.

"Littlejohn!" Moby croaked. "Long Sam Littlejohn!"

"Well, what of it?" the outlaw snapped. "An' in case yuh're interested, I'm the gent who rode up into the pass at the wrong time and had to wing this Dick Forbin snake. Elevate, Moby, and turn yore back while I clean them holsters at yore legs."

CLEVE MOBY dropped the rifle, and his face was a sickly white color as he turned his back.

Long Sam shucked twin guns from Moby's holsters, hurled the weapons into the timber, then turned the sawed-

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

off tough roughly about, shoved him down the slope.

"Head for Jim Nash's house," the gaunt outlaw ordered. "I don't know all the details of this mess, but I've heard enough to know that this Nash hombre has been framed for robbery and murder. Rattle yore hocks, Moby, or I'll toss a rope over yore neck and drag yuh."

Moby cursed and fumed, genuine alarm in his voice and eyes. He whirled like a bobcat, tried to bolt into the timber. But Long Sam, crippled, expecting Moby to bolt and knowing that he could never follow the man fast enough to stop him, had already swapped six-gun for lariat rope. Long Sam flipped a loop, snarled Moby just as the stubby hellion was diving towards a brush heap.

Long Sam stepped up into the saddle, took the slack out of his rope, dallied it around the horn, and touched Sleeper. The roan went down the hill, Moby whirling and bouncing along the soft earth. Long Sam stopped after a few yards, hipped around in the saddle, and looked back.

"Want to get on yore hoofs and walk ahead of me, or do I keep draggin'?" he inquired.

Moby spat out a mouthful of leaf mold, got to his feet, and staggered down the slope, cursing and wild eyed. As they approached the house a slim young fellow with black hair and keen black eyes stepped out through the yard gate, to stand watching them, scowling angrily. Moby halted a few feet in front of the black eyed youngster, quailing under the feel of the rope that was still about his pot belly.

"You Jim Nash?" Long Sam asked the young fellow.

"I'm Nash," came the clipped reply. "What's goin' on here?"

"Comin' here wasn't my idee, Nash," Moby panted. "This Littlejohn heller made me come."

"Littlejohn?" Nash snapped, and shot a hand to the butt of the gun at his thigh.

"Ease off on that gun stuff, friend," Long Sam droned. "Sure, I brought this skunk down here. I also fetched that sorrel of yores home a spell ago.

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 109)

A posse will maybe track the sorrel here. Yuh'll be accused of holdin' up the stage, murderin' the s h o t g u n guard."

Nash's face had gone pale, and Long Sam glanced sharply around when a sob of fear came from the ranch house. He saw a slender young woman standing on the end of the porch, one hand pressed to her throat, while she stared in terror at her husband.

"Jim!" she cried. "What does that man mean?"

"Don't get scared, Edna." Nash tried desperately to hide his own fear.

THE girl came off the porch, ran to his side, her small hands clinging desperately to his lean arm.

"Littlejohn, some cuss stole my pet sorrel and my favorite ridin' gear last night," Nash growled. "You just admitted returnin' the hoss. Think you can explain matters?"

Long Sam swung down, took the slack out of his rope, and shoved Cleve Moby towards the house.

"We better get inside, folks," he told Jim and Edna Nash. "From what I've got out of this Moby buzzard, Nash, yuh're in for trouble. But I think we can maybe turn the tables, if yuh and yore wife will get over bein' scared and listen to me. And while we're waitin' for Buck Gilford and the rest of his crew to show up, us three will have the fun of hangin' Moby."

Long Sam winked over Moby's shoulder. But Cleve Moby did not know that. The stubby tough yelled in terror, began begging wildly. And as Moby's nerve cracked, Long Sam grinned coldly.

The sun was less than an hour high when three heavily armed men curbed sweat lathered horses at the Circle N gate and sprang out of saddles.

"Good lord, Littlejohn, the sheriff ain't with Gilford!" Jim Nash croaked.

He and Long Sam were peering out a front window, while Edna Nash sat white and trembling in a deep chair at the far end of the room.

"This puts a kink in our plans, to some extent," Littlejohn g r o w l e d. "Them three yonder are on the shoot,

that's plain. Which is Gilford?"

"That big, sorrel maned devil is Buck Gilford," Nash panted. "The slope-shouldered, bean-pole gent is Dick Forbin. You winged him all right, for his left arm is in a sling, as you can see. That clumsy-looking ox is Snapper Clate, Lazy Q bronc stomper. Littlejohn, we'll never win a shoot-out with them three. They—"

"Get out onto that porch," Long Sam cut in coldly. "Stall them three, keep 'em millin' out there a minute or so."

"I want a gun," Nash growled. "If I go out there without a gun, Littlejohn, I'm as good as—"

"Pipe down before yuh scare yore wife to death, and get on outside," Long Sam ordered. "If them three get into this house, there's no tellin' what'll happen."

Nash moved to the door, and stepped outside just as the three Lazy Q men were nearing the porch. Those three stopped short, hands fluttering down to gun butts as they glared up at the young ranchman.

"We're takin' yuh to town for the law to hang, Jim Nash," Buck Gilford rumbled. "Oce Pendleton, one o' my stage drivers, swears he recognized yuh as the holdup man who robbed his stage to-day an' shot Frank Julian, the shotgun guard, plumb between the eyes."

"That so?" Jim Nash drawled.

THE three Lazy Q gunmen stared at him, taken aback by his cool demeanor. Gilford's rust flecked eyes rolled uneasily right and left, and he muttered something from one corner of his thick-lipped mouth.

"Say, this squirt ain't actin' right a-tall, boss," big Snapper Clate decided.

"Nash is up to somethin'," Dick Forbin muttered uneasily.

"Since when did you three get to be the law?" Nash asked them. "You accuse me of robbery and murder, and say you aim to take me to town. What's your authority?"

"These!" Gilford rasped, and patted his guns. "Sheriff Lew Morgan is away some place, so us three come for

(Continued on page 112)

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(Continued from page 111)

yuh. If yuh act up, an' git shot—"

"I'm not even packin' a gun," Jim Nash laughed coldly. "Ever since I tumbled that you and your bunch are usin' the thickets down yonder to hide cattle and hosses in while worked-over brands heal, Gilford, you've tried to run me out of the country. You figure to let the law hang me on a framed-up charge now, eh?"

"I don't like this, boss," Dick Forbin gulped. "Nash ain't even surprised or sore. He—he's up to somethin'."

"He'll be lookin' up at the roots o' the grass if he don't come along," Snapper Clate barked. "How do we know he ain't got a gun hid inside his shirt?"

"So that's your game?" Nash sneered. "You figure to kill me, then tell the sheriff a cock an' bull story when you lug my remains into Rio Vista town. But it won't work, Gilford."

"Wh-what yuh gettin' at?" Gilford demanded uneasily. "Yuh robbed that stage to-day, an' murdered Frank Julian. A jury would—What the hell!"

A doleful humming jerked the heads of the three uneasy gunmen around. They gaped at a tall, black clad man who leaned lazily against a far corner of the house and watched them out of smoky eyes. Then suddenly Dick Forbin squalled like a catamount, dug for a gun with his good right hand.

"That's him!" Forbin screeched. "That's the heller who horned in to-day an'—"

Forbin's gun was clear, and the blast of it drowned his own words.

Long Sam Littlejohn sprang out from the corner of the house then, a gun in each big, knotty fist. The gaunt outlaw was humming under his breath as lean thumbs caught, lifted, and dropped gun hammers.

Dick Forbin bent at the knees, dropped the smoking gun, and fell face down in the yard. Buck Gilford and Snapper Clate clawed at holstered weapons, their faces twisted in mingled fear and rage as they saw the gaunt black-clad man saunter lazily towards them.

Snapper Clate died before he could shake out a single shot, and Buck Gil-

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

ford missed the only try he had at downing Long Sam with smoking lead.

SNAPPER CLATE'S big body was still falling when Long Sam whirled, slapped gun hammers with both thumbs just as blazing lead from Gilford's guns screamed past his head. Long Sam saw Buck Gilford's great body shudder, twist half around, then wilt in that nerveless manner of a man dying on his feet.

The outlaw came out of his fighting crouch then, reloaded and holstered hot guns, while Jim Nash stood gaping at him from the end of the porch.

"You-you ain't even hit?" Nash stammered finally.

"Never touched me," Long Sam chuckled. "But I've got a hunch I'd better sift, Nash. Deputy Joe Fry will be along any time now. Or this Sheriff Lew Morgan yuh mentioned might mosey out this way. So I'll say thanks for the grub yuh fed me, and for the job yuh done on patchin' the bullet hole Joe Fry put in my leg yesterday mornin'. Sleeper has filled his belly and rested, so we'll be shovin' along."

"Littlejohn, Edna and me are beholdin' to you the rest of our lives," the young rancher said hoarsely. "With Gilford out of the way, and that signed confession you scared out of Cleve Moby, my wife and me can live in peace. I wish there was some way we could pay you for what you've done, amigo."

"Pay me?" Long Sam grinned. 'Well, I reckon I've sorta been paid already, Nash. Adios, best o' luck."

Long Sam was still grinning as he turned towards the corral where Sleeper had been fed and rested. Long Sam's fingers were feeling of the lumpy packets of money beneath his shirt—money Buck Gilford had used to bait a noose for Jim Nash's neck.

"Where Buck Gilford is goin', paper money would shore burn up in a hurry," the outlaw cruckled grimly. "So I'll just hang onto this dinero and try to shake Joe Fry off my tail long enough to get the money into circulation."

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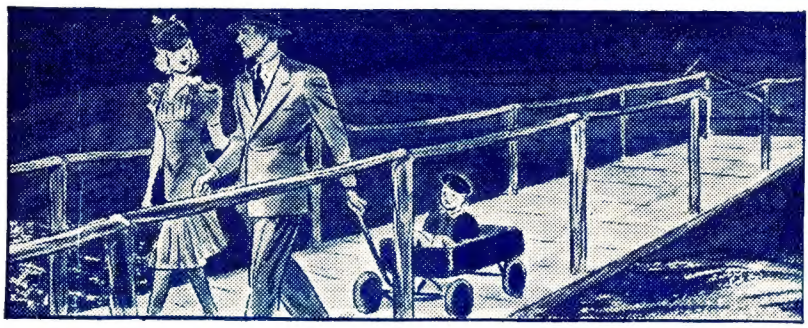

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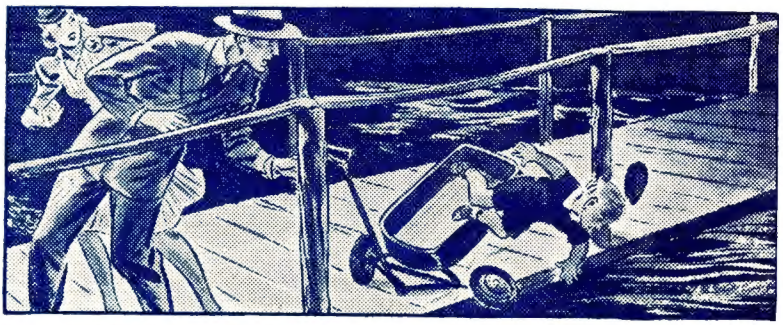

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